Lilith

ndependent, Jewish & frankly feminist

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Lilith turns 30!
Women at 30 tell what worries them now

Who's your Best Friend?
A ritual Judaism forgot to create for us

Breast cancer in comics

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How to be a good friend

(and is there any other kind of friend to be?)

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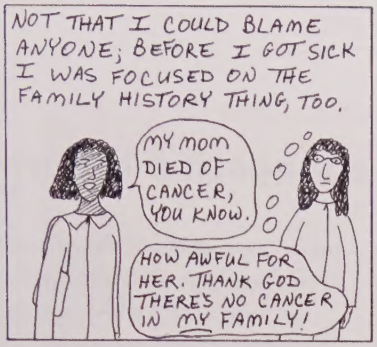

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About Lilith: In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lilith. Lilith said "We are equal because we are created from the same earth." The Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b

From the Editor

What does it mean for a magazine to turn 30?

Please take out your timbrels! This issue marks the start of Lilith's 30th anniversary celebration.

Since the magazine's launch by a handful of Jewish women journalists and editors in 1976, it has covered everything from the victories of women wanting to be ordained as rabbis to the struggles of transgender Jews. The issue of Lilith you're holding now has the same broad range of subject matter as that first: personal relationships (in this case, best-friendship); new definitions of what constitutes a "religious" experience for women; a grittily honest memoir-in-comics, and more, as you see from the preceding page. While we plan to celebrate this anniversary for all of the coming year, we start with a peek into the lives of women who are, like Lilith, turning 30. Coming up will be snapshots of other cohorts too.

All those who've been associated with the magazine—readers, editors, writers, artists, advertisers and Lilith's immensely loyal and energetic board—should join with our small staff in saying a *shehechiyanu*, in which we express our gratitude for having reached this day. And grateful we in the Lilith office are, for the privilege of creating the magazine anew every three months, for the joy of working in a milieu where women's words are heard, for the blessing of working relationships that are so stimulating and so very much fun. (To read more about women's relationships at work and at play visit Lilith.org)

What does it mean for a magazine to reach this milestone in a world where magazines have almost as short a life-expectancy as restaurants? When we look back at some of Lilith's landmark articles, we (meaning the names you see on the masthead, opposite) are astonished and proud to see how many "firsts" are in those pages—how many topics Lilith has been the first to broach, how many subjects and how much activism we've brought into the light for the first time. First-person accounts of women struggling to detach from the Hasidic world, those complicated relationships between volunteers and paid professionals in Jewish organizations, new rituals for everything from childbirth to a "celebration of wisdom" for birthdays past 60, the sexual misconduct of charismatic rabbis, violence in Jewish homes, the wacky joy of throwing a mitzvah shower for a bride, what Purim really signifies, the Jewish stake in abortion rights, how Jewish women feel about giving away money, the JAP and her sister stereotypes, and more. Plus our annual fiction and poetry prizes, the dozens and dozens of interns who have learned and taught under our roof, the Talent Bank for Jewish women experts on everything from AIDS to Zionism.

But so much for self-congratulation, however well deserved. What does it mean to turn 30, for a woman or a magazine? One of our tradition's classic teaching-texts is "*Ehad mi yodeah*," the counting song sung at Passover, which builds by highlighting numbers: God is one, the Tablets of the Commandments two, and so on. But for women, there's hardly a need for a mnemonic device. We're tutored early on that numbers count. Every doctor's appointment, for Heaven's sake, reminds us: Age at first menstruation? Date of last period? Number of pregnancies? Month of annual Pap smear? And then there are those labile numbers: What's your bra size? Your pants size? Your weight? And then there are the more secret numbers, like the PINs of our lives, the numbers we tally inside our own heads: numbers that relate to highly personal events rather than to reproductive or lipid history: How old were you when…? How many have you…? How often did you…?

The coyness around women's birthdays feeds into this math anxiety. Some 30 years ago, Gloria Steinem, thinking she could cure us all, famously replied to someone who said she did not look her age that "This is what 40 looks like."

Which brings us, in a roundabout way, to the question of how a magazine marks a milestone birthday.

In Lilith's case, with energetic writing and public programs: the magazine itself, Lilith salons in so many cities, the Lilith exhibition on the road. Lectures and readings and more. Our audience continues to span the spectrum from high school students to octogenarians; the magazine at 30 has a lot to say to readers of all ages. And you talk back, as many of you did for the tallit story, with the narratives of your personal lives, letting us know that the drumbeat is heard, that Lilith's tag line—independent, Jewish & frankly feminist—reverberates for you, that we're publishing for smart and savvy readers, who want and deserve the edgy and honest and lyrical writing Lilith intends to publish for at least the next 30 years.

Susan

Susan Weidman Schneider
Editor in Chief

Lilith

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Lilith
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Kosher Clothes

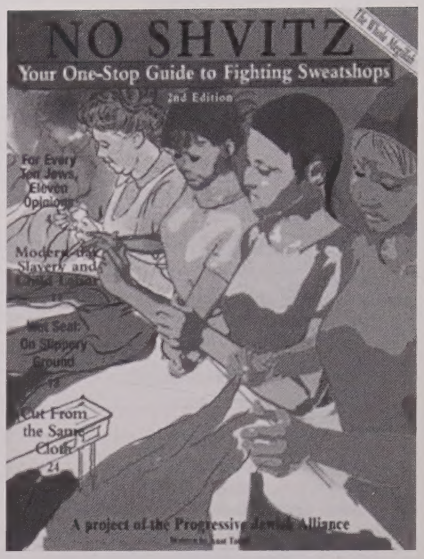
Abby Levine is obsessed with clothes—but not the way you'd think. It's her mission in life to make sure that clothing is sweat-free—made from non-sweatshop labor.

For Levine, this isn't just a human rights issue, it's a Jewish issue. "Not only does our moral tradition mandate respect for workers, but as Jewish women we have a rich history full of inspiring labor activism in the garment trades." That's why she runs the "No Shvitz" campaign with Progressive Jewish Alliance, to get Jews involved in the fight to end sweatshop abuses. Her current campaign has taken her all the way to San Francisco City Hall, where she has been organizing to pass a municipal resolution to mandate that all city-purchased clothing is sweat-free. She was recently appointed to the Sweat-Free Advisory Committee by the mayor of San Francisco, as the only representative of the faith-community.

"Being kosher is not just about what you eat, it's about how you live," says Levine. "We want Jews to think about whether or not all the products they consume are kosher, in all senses of the word."

Progressive Jewish Alliance recently sponsored No Shvitz Shabbat, with a panel of speakers at Sharith Israel, a reform synagogue in San Francisco.

"We're seeing real interest—and commitment—from Jewish organizations," says Levine. "Everyone who has been to a Jewish summer camp knows that you come home with a ton of camp t-shirts. Now, 11 summer camps in California have committed to buy sweat-free t-shirts, including Camp Kee Tov and [Reform movement] Camp Newman." Now that summer camps have taken the pledge, Progressive Jewish Alliance is encouraging even larger Jewish organizations to make a commitment for their t-shirts to be "no shvitz."



"We need Jews to take action for justice," she adds. "To kvetch is human; to act is divine." **—Orli Cotel**

Kosher Meat

In 2004, when PETA released footage from the kill floor of AgriProcessors, the nation's largest kosher meat packing plant, people were appalled to learn that identification with kashrut and Judaism does not necessarily imply humane treatment of animals. Now, we are learning that this fact applies to treatment of humans as well. The immigrant worker's experience is never far from the collective Jewish memory. Based on this, and the ethical standards mandated by Jewish law, one would expect that Jewish corporations would be above, or at least at, par when it comes to treatment of their workers. Sadly, this is not always the case. AgriProcessors has been accused of seriously mistreating its largely Hispanic immigrant work force and although Jews have left the sweatshops, they still own a large number of them, most notably in L.A.

"In Iowa Meat Plant, Kosher 'Jungle' Breeds Fear, Injury, Short Pay," by **Nathaniel Popper**, came out in the Forward in late May. Interviews with dozens of Hispanic immigrant workers at the plant, along with local religious leaders and union organizers, revealed the substandard conditions that many of the workers experience. Faced with long hours, low pay (among the lowest in the slaughterhouse industry), and dangerous conditions (they receive very little safety training), the workers have nowhere to turn. "Being here," said an anonymous woman quoted in the article, "you see a lot of injustice. But it's a small town. It's the only factory here. We have no choice."

Noted writer on Jewish food, Joan Nathan, told Lilith that "eco-kashrut is going to be a bigger issue in the future, and violations of workers' rights like this are only the tip of the iceberg.... People are more and more thinking about how animals are handled. I have spoken to many Jews who follow the laws of kashrut who would rather buy a humanely slaughtered nonkosher piece of steak or chicken, for example, than a kosher inhumanely slaughtered one."
—Tamar Weinstock

*Traditionally, the voice of a Jewish woman—*kol ishah*—was not to be heard in public, lest it arouse men. These pages are for news about Jewish women, in our own strong voices.

"I listened, rapt, as professional trainers explained how they taught dolphins to flip and elephants to paint. Eventually it hit me that these same techniques might work on that stubborn but lovable species, the American husband."

Amy Sutherland, in her much-emailed article "Modern Love: What Shamu taught me about a Happy Marriage," New York Times, June 25, 2006

Selling Women

Human trafficking—transporting of people against their will for sexual exploitation—is an evil being committed in our own backyards, as **Ilana Kramer** reported in "Modern-Day Sex Slaves," Spring 2006. This August, in an upper-crust neighborhood in Washington, D.C., an Asian sex-slave ring was broken up. And in New York, the NYPD announced in August the arrest of 31 people in connection with an international prostitution ring. At the same time, the New York State legislature has been working form a different angle, trying to make trafficking a legal as well as a moral offence. Although there are laws on the books criminalizing prostitution, assault and coercion, there are no comprehensive statutes that tackle trafficking head on.

Assemblyperson **Jeffrey Dinowitz** (D.) said that a proposed bill "will set severe penalties for those engaged in human trafficking, whether it's sexual servitude or labor servitude." In addition, the bill would help provide services to the victims.

Jewish community organizations are already involved in the battle, led primarily by the UJA-Federation of New York Family Violence Task Force, founded and led by **Anita Altman**. The task force has met with Dinowitz and with other organizations to ratchet up public awareness about these rights abuses.—**Melanie Weiss**

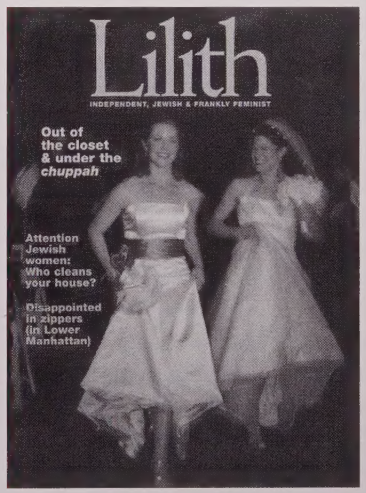
For information:
www.stophumantraffickingny.org
or Anita Altman at (212) 836-1619;
altmana@ujafedny.org

"I am confident that future generations will look back on today's decision as an unfortunate misstep."

Judge Judith Kaye, in the dissenting minority opinion on whether the New York State constitution provides for gay marriage.

From Our Readers

Thank you for your wonderful Summer 2006 issue of Lilith, and the most beautiful, life-affirming cover photograph. Thank you, Tamar [Prager, "Coming Out in the Orthodox World"], for poignantly sharing your difficult journey, from the day you fell in love with Arielle, to the extraordinary moment of your commitment ceremony, to the day your father spoke the words, "that began to change the hearts and minds of many that night." He ended it perfectly, "We all have a right to live and love freely with our chosen companion." Tamar and Arielle, you are so fortunate to have such understanding and love from your families and friends. Now we embrace you, and send our blessings; may you only know happiness and love from your life together.



In spite of the often frightening attacks on the LGBT community, at times, sadly, from within our Jewish community, Lilith has never wavered in support, and understanding of Jewish lesbians. Our voices are always heard in your pages. We are confident that your continuous support will benefit future generations, despite temporary setbacks, in our quest for equality.

— Annette Miller and Gloria Weiner
(via e-mail)

Lilith Writers Make News

Alice Sparberg Alexiou, a Lilith contributing editor, has just published *Jane Jacobs: Urban Visionary*, exploring the life and work of the self-taught urban theorist, whose trailblazing *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Rutgers University Press, 2006) has been a classic for over four decades. Jacobs died in April, a few months before the book's U.S. publication.

Tamara Fishman, a former Lilith intern who's now a singer/songwriter, has just released a new CD, "The Hunger and the Silence," on which she sings, plays the guitar and waxes poetic. Her appealing mix of folk, soul and blues was described as "classic" and "timeless" by East-Village.com and she was one of the Spring Artists-in-Residence at the Makor/Steinhardt Center of the 92nd Street Y. Find out more at www.tamarubi.com.

Lilith fiction editor **Yona Zeldis McDonough** has won the Once Upon a World Children's Book Award for *The Doll with the Yellow Star* (Henry Holt, 2005). Created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the prize is awarded to children's books "which deal with issues of tolerance, diversity, human understanding and social justice, thus inspiring a young reader to promote positive change in the world." *The Doll with the Yellow Star* is the story of eight-year-old Claudine and her beloved doll, Violette. The inspiration for the book, McDonough says, was a Lilith article by Susan Schnur, "Badges of Shame" (Fall 1989), based on interviews with the real-life Claudine, Trudie Strobel. McDonough's book is dedicated to Schnur.

Shirim: A Jewish Poetry Journal, focused a recent issue on the poetry of **Myra Sklarew**, former Lilith poetry editor and judge of Lilith's 2006 Charlotte Newberger Poetry Competition. Shirim editor **Marc Dworkin** writes that these poems "inform us how necessary it is...to live through the eyes of those who have come before".

"Maybe there's a cycle at work here: militant feminism followed by lipstick and cocktails, followed, in a generation or two, by another gust of militancy. But this time around the circumstances are vastly different. In the 1920s, women were seeing their collective fortunes advance. The Western nations were granting them suffrage; contraceptives were moving beyond the status of contraband. Contrast those happy developments to today's steadily advancing war against women's reproductive choice: the banning of abortion in South Dakota, fundamentalist pharmacists refusing to fill prescriptions for birth control.

Worldwide, the situation is far grimmer, as fundamentalist Islam swallows one nation after another.... I've always liked to think that feminism is the West's secret weapon against Islamism. How can an ideology that aims to push half the human race into purdah hope to claim the moral high ground? Islamic feminists would fight Islamism, and we Western feminists would offer our sisterhood in the struggle. But while Muslim women are being stuffed into burkas, American post-feminists are trying to stuff their feet into stilettos."

Barbara Ehrenreich on HuffingtonPost.com, posted on July 10, 2006

"If you can't hear me in the back, put your hands up—don't complain later."

Grace Paley, before reading from her short stories to at the American Jewish Library convention in Boston, June 2006

"Jewish peasant to secular socialite"

That's how author **Lauren Weisberger** describes the Jewish trajectory of the Devil herself in her famous new book, *The Devil Wears Prada*. The main character, Andrea, would-be-writer and unexpected assistant to the most difficult woman in New York, has a Jewish background much like Weisberger's. More juicily, the character referenced by the book's title, editor-from-hell Miranda Priestly, was once upon a time known as Miranda Princhek, native of London's one-time Jewish East End, and daughter of a penniless scholar of Jewish texts. Many critics were quick to notice the struggle with assimilation as adding an additional layer of thoughtfulness and meaning to the book; unfortunately, in what one critic described as a need to play things "Hollywood safe," all Jewish undertones have been excised from the movie version. —**MW**

"I expect the worst from religious extremists; moderate Muslims disappoint me more. We call for a "proportionate response" from Israel. Yet when we diminish or ignore Hezbollah's crimes, we engage in a disproportionate response of our own. It has attacked Israel from southern Lebanon and Gaza, the very areas that the Jewish state had unilaterally evacuated. If Islam is another word for peace, what is unIslamic about opposing such bald aggression?"

Irshad Manji, Muslim feminist activist and scholar in The Times (of London), August 9, 2006

Soap—and Information—from Afghanistan

Describing herself as a "recovering journalist," **Sarah Chayes** has a new profession: she makes soap. Well, not exactly. More accurately, she runs a collective called "Arghand" in the Afghan city of Kandahar (one of the strongholds of the Taliban). And, for the month of July 2006, she relapsed into journalism, sharing her experiences and insights in a blog published on the New York Times homepage. Chayes was originally sent to Afghanistan in 2001 as a reporter for NPR (no stranger to conflict zones, she also reported from Kosovo). By 2002, however, she'd left journalism to help found Afghans for Civil Society, which accomplished several service projects during her tenure there, including building a well and a radio station. Now, however, Chayes is on to other projects, including soap-making, which sprang from the need to make the best use out of Kandahar's fruit-based agriculture (her previous collective focused on dairy—most of the Kandaharis who were part of that effort have joined her in Arghand).

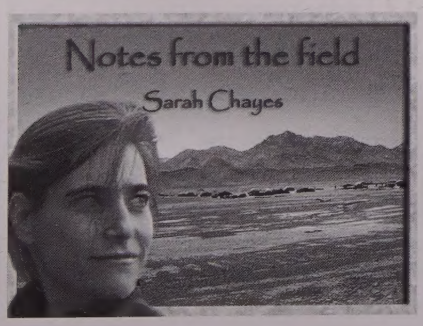
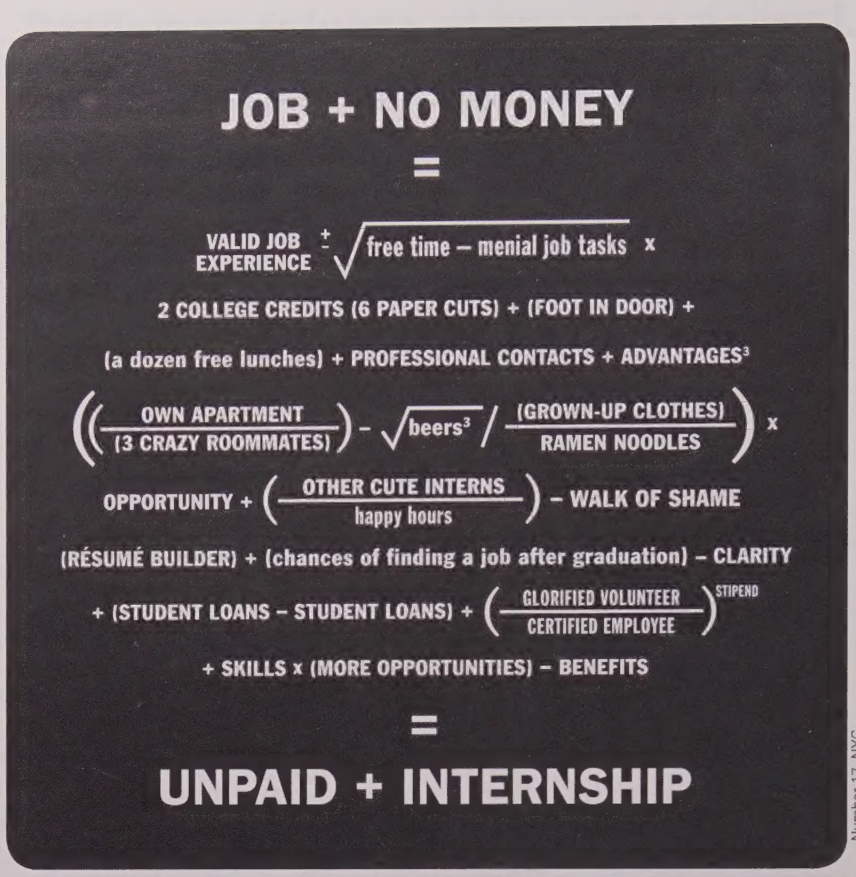


photo from www.arghand.org

For Americans for whom Afghanistan is still an opaque and amorphous concept of a country, Chayes' blog may have proved even more valuable than her soap. Despite their location at the center of an ill-defined, ill-understood but seemingly endless conflict, Chayes says that Kandaharis are "the least ideologically motivated people I have ever met." She invited her blog readers to feel a part of her journey, along with her Afghan neighbors, "waiting and watching" as events unfold. —**MW**

Internships: Friend Or Foe?



Number 17, NYC

Are they a foot in the door to a fulfilling career? Or a kick in the gut for a student struggling to figure out what she wants from a job—and what she can afford en route to graduation? Well, that depends on whom you ask. Either way, it's clear that the issue of paid versus unpaid internships has caught the attention of people outside the usual bounds of students, career counselors and human resource departments.

This past spring, **Anya Kamenetz**, author of *Generation Debt: Why Now is a Terrible Time to Be Young* (reviewed in Lilith, Summer 2006), wrote a New York Times op-ed piece—titled "Take This Internship and Shove It"—in which she argued that unpaid internships are actually detrimental: they foster an unhealthy "performative passion"—the idea that anyone who's willing to work for free must love her work passionately (which she links to low rates of unionization among young workers), they can further muddle lines of obligation and responsibility *vs.* reward and they mess with what Kamenetz calls the meritocracy of capitalism. Furthermore, there's a clear class bias: only those who can afford to work without pay have access to whatever advantages these internships might provide.

Reader response to Kamenetz was fast and forceful. A professor wrote in to say that internships should function as classes, not real jobs. Some letter writers worried about the legality of "work" that does not meet minimum wage requirements. And many students and former students wrote in to say that unpaid internships often compensate for their lack of payment by opening doors to greater opportunity than would, say, a summer burger-flipping stint.

Certainly, the young women who have emerged from Lilith's own internship program can attest to that. Providing a small stipend—and the luxury of part-time hours to allow students to hold other jobs—reflects on Jewish and feminist ethics, and the successes of the magazine's 120-plus former interns speak to a working system. Lilith's overstuffed folder of intern responses and evaluations is filled with two common sentiments: the first, an appreciation of the community of the office ("You all do the work I do," marvelled **Sadye Vassil**, noting that even though she did a lot of photocopying, so did everyone else). The second common theme is a sense of wonder at how consciously Lilith interns are valued. **Susannah Jaffe** says it all: "To this day, it boggles my mind that we were taken seriously at the age of 19."

So while an op-ed piece in the Times is certain to catapult any issue into its 15 minutes of fame, the question of whether unpaid internships are smart, ethical or even legal isn't new—and it isn't going anywhere, certainly not with competition for jobs as fierce as ever for recent graduates, who in some schools must complete an internship just to obtain their degrees. Kamenetz raises excellent points about the effect internships can have not just on individuals but on the economy at large, but the decisions that lead students to yea-or-nay a specific opportunity are private ones. Perhaps the issue is best captured by the Times' quirky accompanying graphic: Job + No Money = Unpaid + Internship—with a whole lot of confusion in between. **—MW**

"Many Western couples find in the employment of migrant workers a way of 'averting gender and generational conflict over domestic work'."

Ilana Hammerman, in her review of Bridget Anderson's "Just Another Job? The Commodification of Domestic Labor," Haaretz, June 23, 2006

"One goal of a government initiative called Healthy People 2010 is to persuade 50 percent of mothers to breastfeed their babies for at least six months by 2010. However, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act only allows women to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave and that only in companies with more than 50 people."

from an article in Womens eNews (July 31, 2006) calling for legislation to make workplaces more nursing-friendly by providing lactation rooms and better leave policies

Poetry

structure of return

like god
to his throne in the clouds
chuckling
because his rabbis have outwitted him
in a debate

or at least that's how
the rabbis tell the story

their wives in the kitchen
know the joke was in the knots
they tied in the soup noodles
he swallowed 3000 years later

—Anne Blonstein

Are You a Therapist? Visit Vancouver

One October weekend in 1992, a remarkable conference took place in Seattle, Washington. More than 350 Jewish women—mental health practitioners, academics and community activists—gathered from all over North America to create a "Shelter in the Wilderness," and to explore the intersection of Judaism, feminism and psychology. Little did we know that our little convoy from Vancouver would be the only "offspring" of the conference still to be meeting and talking together after all these years. (Unlike some American groups which disbanded after failing to agree on a focus, we tend to joke that, being Canadian, we are so "nice" and "accommodating" that it didn't occur to us to disagree.)

We have met monthly for 14 years in the same home, and continue to grow, often challenged by friends and each other about the legitimacy of having an all-Jewish women's group. Though Jewish, we are otherwise diverse—graduate students and retired psychology professors, religious and secular; psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and clinical counselors. We have managed to continue to enjoy and learn from each other—always in a challenging, noisy, supportive environment. We still focus on women's issues, and most of our conversations have a feminist perspective, but the fact that we are all Jewish women in the discussion is what tends to create the intersection. Unexpectedly, we've created a sense of a Jewish "home" for many of the women not involved with the local Jewish community.

The question of how our Jewishness affects our work takes us to two very different places: the not-very-controversial subject of how we are influenced individually by Jewish teachings, and the more difficult subject of anti-Semitism or anti-Israel sentiment in the workplace. Do we say anything when events are scheduled for Friday nights or Jewish holidays? Is it important to identify your religion to a client? What happens when you call someone on an anti-Semitic comment? Responses tend to vary by community, with Israelis, as a visible group, facing the most confrontational interactions. We have had professional workshops on everything from schizophrenia, trauma and attachment theory to surrogacy, self-care for therapists, psychopharmacology and transgender issues. We have learned about the impact of terrorism on the police force in Israel from recent immigrants, about the impact of *lashon hara* from local rebbetzins, and we've even considered the kabbalistic view of psychological problems.

Our group functions both as a support system and a clearinghouse of local information. I act as group coordinator, and I'm as surprised as anyone that we have lasted this long. But new women turn up, new ideas for conversations are brought forward, someone tells me how much the group has meant to her, and I just keep the wheels turning, keeping the conversation alive and fulfilling the vision begun those many years ago.

—Beverley Kort

at

...t-shirts for the generations

"My mother," one of my first t-shirts read, "is an otolaryngologist." I was the only kid in my first grade class with that shirt. I was the only one with a NARAL shirt, too, and probably the only one whose mother read Ms. Magazine's "Stories for Free Children" at bedtime. Today, I can still feel my embarrassment about those shirts, remember coveting the Barbie shirts I wasn't allowed (Barbie might give me a negative body-image) and wondering why my mother spent so much time at work, instead of baking cookies, or getting her hair done, like my friends' mothers.

I felt different, and difference, then, felt like a liability.

Twenty-three years later, as a feminist and a rabbinical student, I'm grateful for the difference, the t-shirts and the stories. I'm grateful for the earnest and idealistic feminism instilled in and pushed on my little sister and me.

Unfortunately, I could use a few t-shirts of my own these days. The pressure in my (Reform, Jewish) community to be partnered is intense and unrelenting, and even my mother would love to see me pregnant, especially as my 30th birthday approaches. My starting salary at a congregation or Jewish organization will someday likely be less than my male counterparts, mostly because of my gender, and all those things that my mother told me about being able to be anything I want are true (but only in the Reform movement, and definitely not in Israel). Women's bodies are still objectified, and Jewish women's bodies (and selves) are still the butt of too many JAP jokes.

So will I make my daughters wear "My mother is a rabbi" t-shirts? Probably. And will I have my children later than my mother? Absolutely. Will I have to fight for gender equity in the (Jewish) workplace in the same ways she did? Probably. Will my fights be about issues as fundamental, and as troubling? Gratefully, only some of them. And maybe, someday, my daughters will wear t-shirts that say: "My grandmother is an otolaryngologist, my mother is a rabbi, and hopefully, someday, I won't need a t-shirt."

Jordie Gerson is a 3rd year rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College in New York. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, and a writer for Jewcy (www.jewcy.com); she lives in Brooklyn, New York, with a nice collection of t-shirts.

...becoming a pumpkin in Paris

I have read Simone de Beauvoir, I subscribe to Lilith, I believe women are fit for any professional role, and when I get married I will more than likely hyphenate my name—even if that means assuming the responsibility of a combined last name sporting 3 Zs. But I would not like to live with my partner the way de Beauvoir did with Sartre, I read Lilith but I also have nothing against "chick lit," I do not strive to be a firewoman and I do still want to partake in the old-fashioned union of marriage.

I am not old enough to have read the New York Times before "Ms." became the proper title for a woman, and I never doubted for a second that I would not work full-time upon graduating from college. Feminist rights that our not-so-distant foremothers fought for are simply "norms" for us lucky, affluent, young women of the West. I still believe there is a need for female solidarity and adamantly adhere to the precept that women deserve equality and the right to "contradiction": women have the right to burn bras *and* be stay-at-home moms.

I see 30 as a landmark. Cinderella-esque is how I feel. I imagine that if I am not married by 11:59 PM on September 15th, 2007, I will not turn into the poor girl in rags, but rather, like the carriage, into a full-blown pumpkin: shape, color and all! I imagine my boyfriend on the morning of the 16th as he rolls over to say "Joyeux anniversaire, mon amour..." and opens his eyes to find that his lips are pressed against a cool, delicately grooved, saffron-colored... PUMPKIN!

Two-and-a-half years ago I began working at a Jewish organization. The Jewish job coupled with having a non-Jewish partner has forced me to see my Jewish self as having as many angles and colors as a prism; much depends on the aspect of the light and the angle from which it is viewed.

Emily Mazo has been an American in Paris for the past 7 years; she currently works as a program directtor for a Jewish NGO.

30...

We asked women born the year Lilith was launched to tell us what they worry about today.

...sexy and funny

Our culture encourages us to use the milestone of "turning 30" as a time to make changes if things seem to be going awry. I don't think that sort of introspection should end when I turn 31 next month!

Growing up in the Modern Orthodox community of New Jersey, I felt isolated as a nascent feminist. My mother suggested that I read Blu Greenberg's *On Women and Judaism*. Before I read her book, I honestly did not know that anyone (besides myself) was thinking about issues of gender and Judaism.

Feminism, for me, is an ongoing project to ensure that women do not incur social, economic or political disadvantages on account of their sex. Unfortunately, in the popular mind, the term feminist has taken on negative meanings, connoting a woman who is man-hating, child-hating, humorless and cut-throat; who would never wear a slinky dress. This (mis)appropriation of the term feels like a way of using superficial (and blatantly false) stereotypes to chip away at the social and economic gains that feminists have earned on behalf of all women. Luckily, there are many people my age who continue to identify as feminists—most of them sexy, lovable, and funny.

Rachel Kranson is getting her doctorate in American Jewish History from New York University. She is also a contributing editor of Lilith.

...leaving Mother Russia

Both my mother and I were born in the former Soviet Union, but I came to America when I was three. She had just turned 31. How did she spend her thirtieth birthday? She applied for documents to leave a communist country and everything she ever knew. My thirtieth birthday I will spend partying at a Russian restaurant with my friends. At 30 she was leaving Russia behind, and I've finally come to terms with that part of myself and will be celebrating it.

My life has been shaped by the same things my mother fled: communist Russia, anti-Semitic taunts. Ever since I can remember, I was told that in America I have the freedom to be myself without worrying what the government or others think. Yet there were restraints here as well—imposed by my parents. Because there was so much opportunity, why settle for being a writer? Be a doctor, a lawyer, anything else that can make money and ensure that I would not live in poverty, as my family did when we arrived in 1979. I became an English teacher because this was the only subject I excelled in, and teaching was practical and secure. I lasted six years. Now, I'm a writer. I found out recently that my mother always wanted to be a writer too, but my grandfather told her it wasn't practical. She's a chemist—a great one—and feeds her creative mind by giving speeches at her friends' parties, weddings, and anniversaries.

So, when everyone makes toasts on my birthday, I'll make one for my mom, and thank her for spending her thirtieth birthday filling out papers so that I can spend mine dancing.

Margaret Gelbwasser is a freelance writer. Her essay "Blending the Red with the White and the Blue" about growing up Russian, Jewish and American, was recently published in *Waking Up American: Coming of Age Biculturally.*

...remedial Girly Studies

In her 30s, my mother was busy defining herself against her own lovely mother who seemed too passive, deferential, and self-sacrificing...and who wore nailpolish! My mother is a passionate feminist (academic). For a time, I really rebelled. I saw feminism as the territory of the academic who speaks in semi-colons. It was not until I realized how different my feminist strength was from other women around me that I had no choice but to say, "Fine. Yes, I am a feminist!"

At the same time that my mother continues to study the place of women in society, I struggle to catch up on the Girly Studies my friends of non-feminist mothers experienced early on—like how to apply makeup properly, or...moisturizer. A month away from 30, I see that life is not linear but episodic, and that it's the journeys, shifts and changes that are exciting and not the search for sameness.

When I met my non-Jewish boyfriend, I thought "uh-oh, I didn't plan for *this* to happen!" Now, two years later, it's pretty clear that his sense of civic responsibilty and his interest in analyzing Jewish texts make me a better Jew. He's just the kind of Jewish partner I have always wanted, just not Jewish.

Lauren Antler, a comedian, performs her show, "How to Fight the Patriar-chy: Lessons from the Daughter of a Jewish Feminist" with her mother, Joyce Antler.

...no top-tier offspring—yet

Several times in the past year, my 89-year-old grandmother has reminded me that a week before she turned 30, she gave birth to my father—an unbelievable milestone for this feisty Holocaust survivor who lost her first family. It is now 59 years later, a week before I—the first grandchild, of genealogical importance second only to that of my father—turn 30. In a ballgown, in front of 500 renowned scientists, I am accepting a national award for my doctoral dissertation from the largest scientific society in the world. Still, there is something that colors the *nachas* that has stemmed from my breakthrough research accomplishments—it is the pressure to find a Jewish man, to settle down and have children. I have three degrees from top-tier institutions, publications in top-tier journals—but, alas, no top-tier offspring on the way. Don't worry, Grandma—all in good time.

Raquel L. Lieberman is a National Institutes of Health postdoctoral research fellow at Harvard Medical School.

...William-Wants-a-Doll grew up

Raised listening to "Free to Be You and Me," my generation was taught to expect it all. We'd achieve career success and come home to husbands who were equal partners, sharing fully in the childrearing and household chores.

Somewhere along the way, though, we realized that "equalness" was perhaps as great a myth as the feminine mystique. Instead of seamlessly balancing the high pressure career with children, there is now a new myth of motherhood. Beginning with Diane Keaton in "Baby Boom" and up through Allison Pearson's protagonist in *I Don't Know How She Does It*, ideal motherhood means staying home and stumbling upon a nurturing/artistic/inspiring profession we can do from home with a baby on one hip. So much for the corner office.

But perhaps the greatest change is that William and his doll are all grown up; now mothers and fathers (at least under my roof) are struggling with the same elusive work/life balance.

Talia Cohen is a literary agent in New York.

...lesbian mom seeks spa

In my early twenties, I identified strongly as a Jewish feminist, and most of my interests and concerns were closely connected to that identity. Now, at 30, I am also a rabbi, a mother, a lesbian, a life partner, and an ambitious professional. My busy life is rich and satisfying because I have tried to make choices that align with my values and my priorities. I have been blessed to find meaningful rabbinic work that allows me to have time to spend with my family. When I was younger, I was often frustrated because the world around me was not moving fast enough. Today I am happy but tired. In order to parent according to my values and to dedicate myself to my full-time work, I've mostly given up on other important tasks, like cleaning the house, serious political activism, getting regular exercise, and cooking fresh meals. I often fantasize about a few days by myself at a luxurious spa somewhere, a short escape. And yet, I have everything that my younger feminist self dreamed of, and I am enormously grateful.

Rabbi Amber Powers serves as the Dean of Admissions and Recruitment at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in the Philadelphia area.

...redefining modesty

When I hear the word "feminist" I think of women my mother's and grandmother's age; I shy away from the word myself.

I grew up at a time when Jewish women were expected to obtain university degrees and pursue careers. My mother and grandmother are working women with master's degrees and respectable salaries; "feminism" and "women's rights" were among my bread-and-butter principles. Educated during such privileged times and having undeniably benefited from female freedom fighters' fierceness, I now find myself challenging their historically narrow definition of women's "liberation." I ask myself, can't a woman choose to be a homemaker or a mother, a woman who prefers the private sector and its anonymity? Can't the catch phrase "a women's right to choose" also imply a woman's celebrated right to prefer modesty or conservatism or muted sexuality?

Janel Moses has a postgraduate diploma in Jewish Studies from the Universidad de Chile in Santiago. She is a freelance writer and lives with her husband in Herzliya, Israel.

Read more words from women at 30 at www.Lilith.org

Clashing Expectations: Be Fruitful—But Graduate!

By Elana Maryles Sztokman

I remember well the first time I flunked a final exam. I was a 25-year-old graduate student in the Jewish education department at Hebrew University. I had also given birth to my second child a mere four weeks earlier. I have this vivid recollection of sitting at the Jerusalem pool with my baby in the bouncer next to me, trying to master the material of what I considered to be an irrelevant, unnecessarily complicated, ridiculously mandatory subject—Statistics. There I was, naturally dressed in my modest attire of long skirt and hat, in the 100 degree heat of late June, early afternoon Jerusalem —while my husband and toddler waded in their bathing suits in the kiddie pool—and I feigned studiousness. My consequent failure should have come as no surprise considering the circumstances, although at the time I still subscribed to a certain naïve, simplistic religious outlook that believed that somehow, everything always works out for the best. Despite the silly fatalism, my anger and insult at actually failing prompted me to take the exam in second rounds, and this time I actually studied, passing, albeit by the skin of my teeth. Although this event had its happy ending, and I eventually received not only my master's degree but a doctorate as well, that particular moment sticks with me, perhaps as an embodiment of that pull many women feel between motherhood and personal achievement, a moment for me when, for the briefest of intervals, I was fairly certain that my studies were a complete waste of time.

My son is now ten, and I have since added two more children to our family. But this story keeps recurring for me as I observe my students at the religious teacher training college where I work. This is a place, like many others in Israel, where young religious women in their early twenties come to receive their bachelor's degrees and teaching certificates. A large portion of the student body is already married, as evidenced by the abundance of scarves and other forms of head covering around the school. In fact, many of them have babies as well, and often bring them to class. Indeed, babies are everywhere at the school—in class, in the hallways, in the cafeteria, and even in the library. The idea of "quiet" in the library does not extend to infants, whose presence is accepted in every corner at every time. One of my students missed the first two months of class because she was on *shmirat herayon*—literally "pregnancy watch" which refers to bed rest in pregnancy, a loaded term described by Susan Sered as the excessive medicalizing and problemetizing of pregnancy by making women—often unnecessarily—immobile for months at a time. This student eventually came back to class, baby in sling, and told me that she is 25 years old and that this is her third child. I'm not sure why I was so surprised—after all, was I that different at 25? I'm just not sure how she will be able to complete my course. I suppose I should believe that if I could master statistics in Hebrew, she can master educational theory.

I would like to see the religious community encourage girls to put themselves *first* rather than always last.

I have long since removed my hat and skirt, and in fact my entire world view has shifted several times since that day I tried to study statistics at the pool with my new baby. I have been involved in my own process of deconstructing layers of religious cultures of gender, a gradual and perhaps never-ending process of wrestling and reconstructing as I have renegotiated a whole series of issues in my life including prayer, marriage, Shabbat and my attitude towards Jewish law. And thus, I find myself very torn when I encounter these young religious mothers who, just like I did, are trying to get their degrees within very challenging circumstances.

My first inclination is to be sympathetic to their situations. After all, when all is said and done, I am glad that they are studying despite the challenges of sleeplessness and breastfeeding, and I would certainly rather see them trying to study than the alternative. Encounters I have had with religious women and girls who no longer consider studying important, for whom studying, reading and mind-expansion are considered male realms, make my heart ache over the souls needlessly sacrificed in the name of religion. As a feminist, I am grateful that the college allows these spaces for women—as religious mothers—to inhabit, to continue to pursue their studies without having to leave their complex lives at the door as if they don't exist. I can't even count how many workplaces I've been in where the sound of a child or a baby is greeted with anger and resentment, seen as a chutzpadik interruption by a careless mother who obviously does not take her professional self seriously.

When I was a fellow on a prestigious program for educational leadership in Jerusalem, for example, a female participant who took her newborn to class from the age of two weeks was told that she had to either leave the baby at home or leave the program. Even with a nanny in the public "coffee" area, she was told that the baby was "disruptive". Despite the sexism and unfairness inherent in such an ultimatum, my colleague promptly considered her options. Eventually, a staff member—the only female member of the academic staff—stepped in and offered her office as a place where nanny and baby could hang out freely. Although the resolution was that my colleague stayed on the program without compromising on breastfeeding, the assumption that babies are distractions from the sacred goal of professionalism remained unchecked.

In that sense, I am grateful that my college is a place where babies are welcome, along with their nursing mothers, who are not seen to have smaller brains but are rather reminders that life is complex and dynamic, and that there are goals more valuable than sterile individualism. Moreover, I like when babies are in my class, because I take it as my mission to keep the mothers educated.

That said, I can't help wishing that these women would wait to finish studying before starting their families. I find myself angry at the sight of all those scarves, skirts and baby slings. Too much baggage for such young women, I sigh. They are missing out on the opportunity to just be students, to have that carefree existence where they are taking care of nobody else except themselves. They are thrust into roles of caretakers before they themselves have finished growing up. I would like to see them have a few years to breathe before entering that mad rush of 24/7 parenting.

Even at the bachelor's level, religious girls dumb themselves down in disturbing ways, because they understand that process to be vital to their identities.

More than that, though, I would like to see the religious community encourage girls to put themselves first rather than always coming last. Young women—especially religious young women—need spaces to think critically, to engage with and challenge the material they're given, material that dictates how they live. I want intellectual pursuit and career ambition to be as vital a part of women's identities as having babies. Perhaps this will help build a religious culture that is

not so intricately tied to female servitude. I fear that, despite many compelling advances for women in orthodoxy, the message that women's desire and comfort are irrelevant remains a powerfully entrenched force indeed. Women learn early that in the scheme of things, their needs are lowest on the totem pole. When I heard, for example, a high school friend with seven children who put off her own studies for many years tell me that her father-in-law does not let her get cleaning help because it is her job, or when another woman told me of her advice from 'teachers' that in order to cope with the drudgery of looking after five children and a husband she should remember that she is doing divine work, I recoil at the thought of the oppressively servile positions into which religious women are constantly put.

My fear is that even at the bachelor's level, religious girls are dumbing themselves down in disturbing ways because they understand that process to be vital to their identities. This impression emerges especially around a frustrating issue: learning to read English. Israeli universities are now getting quite strict about requiring students to read in English, for good reasons. Reading in Hebrew alone leaves one's breadth of information limited, not to mention one's choices of career paths. The staff was told early on that we are required to have at least two English items on our syllabi, and that students must have three to four years of English under their belts in order to get their degrees, so that reading these two articles in English should not pose a problem.

I like when babies are in my class, because I take it as my mission to keep the mothers educated.

I was thus quite surprised when, assigning a choice of three articles to read over the course of one month, I was greeted with an uproar. During that month, every class discussion was interrupted with annoying whines of "Why do we have to do this?" and "I can't do it, there's no way, I don't know how," and "No other teacher is making their students do this." I told them that this was a requirement set not by me but by the college, and if I happen to be the only teacher enforcing this, they should consider themselves lucky to be acquiring such an important skill. Plus, I reminded them that there is no such thing as "I can't" and that the teacher's most fundamental belief must be that everyone can, because their job as teachers will be to facilitate the learning process. I also told them that I would help them along: I conducted in-class exercises, I prepared word lists, we read together with dictionaries at our side, I brought in briefer and easier articles—in short, I went on a mission to make sure that this happens, despite the vocal and relentless protest, and despite several students dropping out and complaining to my supervisors about my strictness.

A few weeks ago, a student walked in whose name was on the registry but who had not yet shown up to class. I asked her where she had been for the first six weeks and she said simply, "I had things to do." When she later heard the rallying cries against the terrible requirement to read English, she brazenly entered the fray and said, "You know, my husband is doing a BA at Hebrew University, and I understand that he's required to learn English, but me? What do I need it for?" This remark really got to me. I replied, "You mean to tell me, that while you and your husband are both doing this degree, it's okay for him to have to learn English and you not?" Other girls laughed, "What, we're not in competition with our husbands!" But that was it for me. I said, "That's it, end of discussion. This is a requirement and you are going to read in English. I'm not discussing it anymore." Since then, the class has dwindled, as have the complaints, but I am not giving up. Husbands or no husbands, babies or no babies, scarves, slings, skirts or whatever, at least when they are in my class, I am going to make sure that these young women learn.

Still, this issue has become quite distressing for me. It's becoming increasingly clear that religious women, while ostensibly achieving some interesting advancements in some areas, are still being indoctrinated to believe that their minds matter less than those of their husbands and children, that babies are the top priority at all cost, and that studies are important only if you can manage it. Even at the secular and more competitive Hebrew U., not only are scarves and slings becoming a more common sight on campus, but I saw a sign the other day that read, "Parents who are also students! New service available this year—childcare. A few spots still left!" Now that's novel, and part of me wishes it had been available ten years ago when I needed it. But part of me is depressed that religious women are still working so hard, so young.

So am I meant to be happy that the women are still learning despite the difficulty? Or sad that their own pursuits are the lowest priority? I think I'm mostly angry at religious educational institutions for continuing to construct the identity of religious womanhood as subservient. But I'm also hopeful—because after all, I was once that religious girl doing what was expected of me, but in the end, it didn't stop me from renegotiating my beliefs and finding a place for myself. I just wish the struggle weren't so hard. •

Elana Maryles Sztokman teaches education and gender issues at the Bar Ilan University Program for Gender Studies, and in other post-secondary settings in Israel. Her dissertation is about the identity development of adolescent religious girls.

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50 Years and Counting

Celebrating Women's Best-Friendship

By Simone Ellin

"Let's have a party to celebrate fifty years of our friendship," Bernice said. "We'll invite all our friends and ask them to bring their best friends. This is quite an accomplishment." When my mother, Ruth Grill, and Bernice Kurchin realized that this milestone was approaching, they knew they needed to mark the occasion with something special.

"Daisy and I have been friends for 75 years," Belle told the group of guests. There was an audible gasp, and then applause. "We met in pre-school."

The party was at Bernice's home, the site of so many of the families' birthday and holiday celebrations over the past 35 years. As the guests arrived there was excitement. Women bearing gifts hugged and beamed, shouting "Mazal Tov!" and "Happy Anniversary!" The table was full of delicious food, the rooms filled with flowers. Thirty women had been invited, and all 30 said yes. It was as if they'd been waiting for decades for an occasion like this—for the moment when their deepest friendships would be worthy of formal validation.

There were Marcie, Natalie and Carla—people with whom I shared memories and warm childhood associations—and there were poets, teachers, one archaeologist and lots of therapists. Ellen Witlieb, an old and dear friend of my parents, was an especially welcome guest. Diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, Ellen hadn't been sure that she'd be able to attend the party. Her presence was meaningful to all of us, but especially to her best friend, Judy. We ate and mingled, drank and caught up. Many of these women were closer to my age than they were to my mother's, but age didn't seem to matter.

After about an hour, we gathered in the living room. The women settled on sofas and chairs, and Bernice and Mom welcomed everyone. Then they proceeded to share the story of their fifty years of best-friendship.

"We met during our freshman year at Brandeis," Bernice explained. "I was planning to room with my best friend, Martha, but she changed her mind and decided to get a single so that she could more easily 'entertain' her boyfriend. I was devastated. The night Martha broke the news to me, I was unable to sleep. I walked down to the pond and there was Ruthie, whom I didn't know. She looked at me and said, 'What's wrong?'"

Bernice laughed, "That's Ruthie! So I poured out my story, and I think we talked until the cafeteria opened for breakfast. After that, we were friends. I used to call Ruthie when she was living with her parents, and her father often answered the phone. 'I need to talk to Ruthie, I'm having a trauma,' I would say. He was a very proper German physician who'd escaped Nazi Germany. He doubtless thought I was completely crazy!"

In some respects Bernice and Ruth were an unlikely pair. Though both young Jewish women, their backgrounds were vastly different. My mother, an only child, spent her first year and a half in Germany, then was hidden for three years in the home of a Catholic couple in Belgium. Reunited with her parents, Mom stayed with her family in Belgium until she was eleven, then moved to Manhattan. Although she describes feeling really like an immigrant—an oddball, never having the right clothes—my mother speaks glowingly of her days at Brandeis. She thrived among the beatniks and intellectuals, the long nights spent philosophizing about art and literature.

Bernice's upbringing seemed more typical. One of four children born to a successful dentist and his wife, she grew up in an upper-middle-class Jewish neighborhood in Queens.

Bernice studied dance, and became involved in the arts scene at Brandeis. I loved the stories that Mom and Bernice told about their days at college. Both Mom and Bernice dated Abbie Hoffman briefly. "He sold submarine sandwiches and had a sports car," my mother said. Mom didn't finish up at Brandeis, however. She began dating a Black poet with bipolar illness, and her horrified parents pulled her out and sent her to City College. Through Bernice's troubled marriage and then divorce, the births of four daughters—two apiece—and new careers (Bernice was a dancer and choreographer, then got her doctorate in archeology; Mom was a full-time mother

and then went to social work school), they were always there for each other.

In later years, Bernice supported my mother through her own painful divorce, and stood by when my mother's new partner, Philip, developed cancer and died in 2003. Together Ruth and Bernice celebrated birthdays, grandchildren, careers. And always the two of them danced! Modern, ballroom, world music, rock-and-roll—everywhere and at every occasion.

Judy and Carla shared their story next. They met almost 30 years earlier when they worked as social workers at the same agency. Casual chats about work, clients, husbands and children gradually developed into a deep friendship. "I was always included in Carla's family events—Passover seders, parties, get-togethers," said Judy. "In 2000, I had to have lots of medical tests, and then again in 2003 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Carla took me for all my appointments, she drove me, she waited, and there was never a question. When I was operated on, she stayed the whole time."

Judy confided, "Not long ago, Carla and I were out to lunch together, and she told me about a young friend who was struggling. 'Don't you have a best friend?' Carla asked the young woman. 'It's very important to have a best friend.' I listened and then I leaned over and nudged her. 'Who's your best friend?' I asked. 'Why, you, of course,' she said. I don't think I'd talked about having a 'best friend' since high school."

"In 1982, when we were both at the office," said Carla, "I got a call from my husband, Ed. He never calls me at work. It was very unusual. He told me that my niece in Israel had phoned. Her brother (our nephew) had been killed fighting in the war in Lebanon. I was hysterical. We had been at this boy's birth; we were very close to him. Judy said, 'I'll bring you home.' And she took care of me, without any hesitation. I wasn't used to being taken care of. It was an important milestone in our friendship."

Then Belle and Daisy told their story. "Daisy and I have been friends for 75 years," Belle told the group of guests. There was an audible gasp, and then applause. "We met in pre-school. Our families lived in a leftist or 'radical' colony in Golden's Bridge, in northern Westchester County [in New York]. Many of the families only came to Golden's Bridge in the summer, but Daisy and I lived there all year round. I think that was one of the reasons we grew so close. We were in the same class in our three-room schoolhouse, and we played together all of the time. We grew up without electricity or indoor plumbing. I think those 'pioneer conditions' brought us closer."

Once Belle and Daisy left the colony they were no longer in daily contact. The two friends had different lives, different lifestyles, yet they remained in touch. "When we talk, it's as if no time has elapsed," said Belle. "We share the good and the bad, and we always know we are thinking of one another. I was insistent that Daisy come to the party with me. I have other friends from 40, 50, even 70 years ago, but I said, 'Daise, it has to be you! Find a way to come. It's really important to me.'"

After all of the women shared their stories, my mother returned to the subject of her friendship with Bernice. She wasn't done; she seemed to need to still put her finger on the absolute heart of their friendship, to articulate what was utterly essential. "I guess the thing of it is, Bernice and I would do anything in the world for one another," she said. "When Neil [my father] left, Bernice was doing an archeological dig in Ireland. She would walk miles to the nearest pay phone to call me. One time when I was going through the divorce, Bernice and I went to a movie. I remember sitting there feeling really lousy, and all of a sudden it occurred to me: I've known Bernice longer than Neil. I had a life before Neil. I will have a life again."

In Boro Park, Brooklyn, in the 1930's, Shirley Liebowitz, Temmie Parnes, and Ruth Furchtgott were inseparable friends. Orthodox girls who shared Zionist passions, "We had in common being warm and unpretentious girls," says Ruth, "intellectual, and with deep family ties." In this 1941 photo, they are each exactly seventeen-and-a-half years old: Shirley and Ruth co-eds at Brooklyn College, and Temmie at Hunter. The years pass. Temmie makes *aliyah* and has six children; Shirley stays in Brooklyn and has three; Ruth lives in Philadelphia and has three as well. "Over the years, we often met in twos," says Ruth, "but rarely in threes."

"One time when I was going through the divorce, Bernice and I went to a movie. I remember sitting there feeling really lousy, and all of a sudden it occurred to me: I've known Bernice longer than Neil. I had a life before Neil. I will have a life again."

"And when Philip [Mom's second husband] was sick," my mother continued, "Bernice said, 'His children and grandchildren have to visit.' Bernice paid their plane fare from Spain and let them stay in her home for an entire month. I remember Philip saying, 'This is a miracle.' To have a friend who would do something like this. Bernice sat with me in the hospital the night before Philip died."

"When I lock myself out," Bernice summed up, "Ruthie has an extra set of my keys. If I miss my stop on the train, I call Ruthie and she picks me up. She nags me about getting enough sleep and eating well. And she listens. We are like an old married couple. We are the constants through extraordinary changes in our lives."

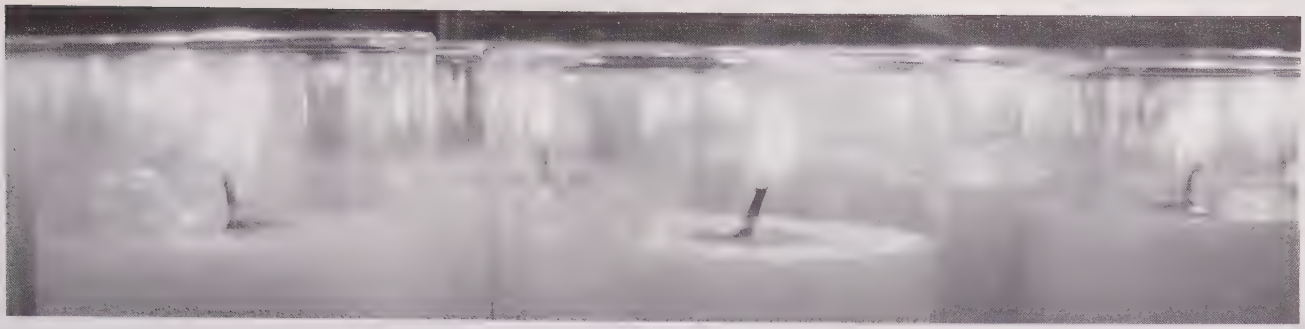
Sixty-five years later, "The Three Musketeers," as they always called themselves—now, Shirley Horowitz, Temmie Konefsky, and Ruth Adler—manage a full reunion. "We have in common remarkably optimistic views of life, despite the fact that each of us has had our share of *tzoris*," says Ruth. They take this photo, and some time later Ruth is shocked to find the earlier photo [preceding page] where they'd stood in exactly the same order, striking identical poses. "What is this miracle?" Ruth wonders. "I break my head over this. What mysterious force keeps us bound together as if there were no passage of time?"

The "ritual" wound down and ended naturally, all of us aware that we had just participated in, and witnessed, something extraordinary and special. There were a lot of cross-friendships in the group; a lot of archiving memories—how old this one's or that one's kids were when they played together. There was a sense that only women could create an event like this, that this ambience was due to our being in a room solely inhabited by females. And many of the best-friendships, interestingly, had grown out of work relationships; after all, that's where most of us spent so much of our time.

There was a profound sense as well of collectively appreciating where different women were in their lives. A feeling that the oldest women had the richest stories, but that there was little emotional difference, really, between the tales of 80-year-olds and those of women in their 30s or 40s. Finally, there was a sense of gratitude towards Bernice and my mother for giving a name to this moment in their relationship: 50th Anniversary. For stopping the clock of our busy lives and making us each take stock of what we had.

Driving back home I thought about the party, and about friendship. It's not easy to be a best friend for 50 years. I thought about the way that women can underestimate the value of their friendships with women as they pursue relationships with men—relationships that are sometimes short-lived or lack the depth and intimacy of female friendships. I reminded myself about the importance of putting aside time for women friends even when work, a husband and children sap my energy. Having small kids myself, it's so rare that I actually make a plan to go out with just a girlfriend—to enjoy a long, intimate conversation—as opposed to seeing them only in the context of couple or family get-togethers. I considered my current friendships, and vowed to strengthen them. I called my best friend in the world and told her she'd missed a great party. •

Simone Ellin is a writer and former social worker living in Baltimore. She dedicates this article to the memory of Ellen Witlieb, an exceptional friend.



Kaddish Keeper

By Merri Rosenberg

"Why are there so many candles on the stove?" my son used to ask when he was a little boy, clearly perplexed by the rows of Rokeach yahrzeit lights blazing away on my stove-top erev Yom Kippur.

There are so many, in fact, that I'm always surprised my smoke detector doesn't go off.

I think I'm the best (if not only) customer for these candles at our local convenience store. A Hindu immigrant, the owner knows to have a plentiful supply on hand once it's August, in preparation for my stocking up before the High Holy Days. When the notices about Yom Kippur's Yizkor service start arriving from synagogue, I begin to collect the yahrzeit candles from Sunnydale Store to be sure I'll have enough for everyone.

Sometime in late summer, I start my mental check list: my parents, my maternal grandparents, my two sisters who died as children before I was born, all the aunts and uncles on my father's side who died childless and have no one to light a candle for them. In recent years, with the deaths of the remaining members of my father's generation, I've started lighting candles for his parents, too, since I'm not sure that anyone else observes yahrzeit for them. In our synagogue's Book of Remembrance published each fall, our entry is nearly twice as long as every other family's. It feels a little excessive to be claiming all these dead relatives as belonging to me.

How did I end up the default, designated mourner for my entire clan? Why do I feel this obligation to remember them with ritual?

The candles are a mnemonic device for me, reinforcing family memories. I was an only child who absorbed early on the message that I would one day carry on the same role as my mother. Like many women of her generation and mine, my mother was the keeper of the family photographs, documents, mementos (stock certificates from my grandfather's defunct dish-making company, a watch that my grandmother received from her parents) family history and myth. My mother was also the responsible party who received the annual yahrzeit notices from the Home of the Sages of Israel.

Now it's my turn to receive—and pay—the bills from the cemetery about annual care for various family plots. Nearly every month, I get a notice about someone's yahrzeit—for an aunt, perhaps, or one of my grandparents, or my own parents. In turn, the checkbook comes out, the candle goes on the stove, and there is a part of me that feels as if I'm back in the shtetl or the Lower East Side, carrying out those responsibilities that were also my foremothers'.

Remembering the dead in such specific ways is very much a part of what it means for me to be Jewish. I still hear my father's voice, urging me to remember; as the baby of his family, he absorbed the lessons from his observant, Russian-born father about the need to tell and preserve family stories. This feels like an ultimate commandment for me to observe: to remember not only significant events in Jewish history, but also the particulars of my own family history. I'm the only one left who heard those stories who still cares to transmit them. Maintaining the tradition of yahrzeit, or saying Kaddish, would be perceived by my cousins as both quaint and meaningless.

So it falls to me. I am quite literally the "keeper of the flame." Or, more accurately, the keeper of all the flames for all those deceased relatives who have no one else. As I prepared to collect my yahrzeit candles for yet another Yizkor, with, sadly, still more candles to add, I am oddly grateful, the candles on my stove an acknowledgment of my central place at the fulcrum of what remains of my family. •

Merri Rosenberg is a freelance writer and editor based in Westchester County, NY, whose work has appeared regularly in the New York Times, Jewish Week and national publications.

How Do Women Define the Sacred?

By Rabbi Susan Schnur with Anna Schnur-Fishman

Several issues ago, Lilith put out a call asking women who wore *tallesim** —traditionally men's prayer shawls—to tell us about them, and the response was overwhelming. Sifting through scores of photos and stories, we began to realize that the contemporary woman's tallit extends the legacy of two historical threads. First, the bold tallesim we wear today—whimsical, hemp-virtuous, showy, girly or deeply personal—announce the end of the era of self-conscious awkwardness and politicization that challenged the pioneer tallit-wearers of the '70s and '80s. Second, the tallesim arise out of thousands of years of domestic female rites that flourished entirely independent of men's.

The appearance of our technicolor dreamcoats in synagogues is electrifying. Though women have become increasingly enfranchised over the past several decades in many areas of Jewish life, our gains in the world of liturgy and worship are nominal, and prayer remains a legacy almost entirely composed and transmitted by and for men. Handmade women's tallitot offer the beginnings of a serious challenge to that. They are not, it turns out, just aesthetic tweaks on men's unchanging-through-the-millennia wool or rayon prayer shawls, but rather communiqués from a distinctly gendered spiritual front. Females in their hand-made tallitot are Trojan horses in the pews: the beginnings of what will be, over time, a recasting of the patriarchal *davennen* that has been Jews' inheritance.

These tallesim also reveal how gendered one's experience of the sacred actually is. Century after century, men have largely been completely happy to don the identical sacerdotal rectangles as one another. Women's tallitot, however, almost immediately morphed into individualized and exuberantly self-expressive garments, providing Jews with a wonderful window into how women experience the sacred. Opening the synagogue doors to females also opened the doors onto female sensibilities, and so the tallit, as one woman told us, reflects "everything that was left out; everything that women find holy that doesn't yet have a place in conventional Jewish worship."

Jewish women have historically been excluded, until late, from formal synagogue worship, but the received cant that "women stayed at home while men went to shul to pray" is patently false. It exposes a narrow and tendentious framing—and a deep misunderstanding—of prayer and the spiritual. Women's homes, indeed, are and have always been "shuls," and we—our mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, our friends' mothers—have reigned supreme there as autonomous "priests," freed from clerical supervision.

Unfortunately, Western tradition (through thinkers like Plato, Durkheim, Eliade, Weber and others) has made normative the rigid binary notion that "spirit" is sacred and "matter" irredeemably profane. (In the story of the Golden Calf, for example, the wayward, unenlightened Hebrews

* *Tallit* is the accepted pronunciation of the Hebrew for prayer shawl; *tallesim* (Yiddish) and *tallitot* (Hebrew) are the plural forms. We have used them interchangeably here.

Tallit by Lucy Rose Fischer. "On my *atara* [tallit neckpiece], joyful women are dancing in the waves of the sea, their arms held high and wide. The text is from my favorite morning prayer: "If our mouths were filled with song as the sea, and our eyes shone like the sun...." The tallit corners are an homage to Jewish women's domestic ties.

For the *tzitzit* [the knotted fringes], I went to a shop in Mea She'arim and there were two kinds, one cheaper and one more expensive. I asked the saleswoman what the difference was and she answered that the more expensive ones had been touched only by men. 'I'll take the cheaper one,' I said."

need a material crutch to access the divine, while the pious Moses experiences God directly without the intercession of "matter.") In this dichotomous formulation, females, along with illiterates, children, the elderly and the infirm, are associated with "things"—which are intrinsically devalued. Our spiritual attachment to Grandma's table linens that we use on Shabbat, to our grown child's ancient tattered "blanky," to our bodies as mediators of religious experience—classically speaking, these all warrant a giant *feh!* As Colleen McDannell, a religion scholar, writes, "While awe...and a sense of the foreign mark the sacred, the profane is commonplace, frequently boring, and familiar. The space of the church or temple is sacred; the home and workplace are profane. The clergy are sacred; women and children are profane."

This polarization disfigures everyone's understanding of how religion and a sense of the sacred "works in the real world," as McDannell puts it. Women's perception of the spiritual is inclusive, embracing William Blake's well-known pronouncement that "Everything that lives is holy." A religion of the senses—seeing, hearing, and touching God—is as valid as a religion of the intellect. There are many doors to the sacred, both shared and unique; women celebrate the heterogeneity of religious experience. Indeed, as opposed to the classic hierarchical sensibility that prescribes "top down" social expression and change, and that posits "illiterate, undifferentiated masses," women have always championed "bottom up"

social expression and change, relying on the authenticity of subjective experience.

Kay Turner, a scholar of folklore, recognizes that "one need go no further for the holy than home." And historically, the home is where women have been free to practice their own brand of faith. Here, in our domestic lives, we acknowledge the "holiness of the ordinary," as feminist theologian Christine Downing calls it. Our *ner tamid* [eternal light] is the "shrine" on our mantle piece consisting of Jewish artifacts and family photographs; our beautifully curated Sabbath and holiday dining tables are "altars" set with infinite liturgical care; our mothers' and grandmothers' holy "Bible" was *The*

"My tallit has *tziztit* tied by four friends. When I bring them together before saying the *Sh'ma*, it feels like gathering loved ones from all over. To me, that's comforting and sacred."

Settlement Cookbook—ours, perhaps, is Joan Nathan's *Jewish Holiday Kitchen*, as well as recipes on dog-eared index cards that became, at some point, sacred replacements for a receding past. Certainly, then, we *"davenned"* at home, practicing what scholars call "affective faith"—engaging our emotions and our senses in ways that are not text-centered. The particular smells that emanate from our kitchens on holy days, for instance—chulent or fassoulia, roast chicken or meat sambusak, apple cake, ma'amoul or sufganiyot—what could be more central to sacred experience, what could better define religion of the heart?

What, then, is holy to women, and what do our "prayers" encompass? Women describing their tallitot to us answered these questions in ways that revealed themselves to be universal.

Tallit by Beth Shepherd Peters. "I transferred family photographs, dating back to my great-great-great-grandmother, onto silk. Wrapped in my tallit, I glance to my left. Cradled in my arm is my grandmother at 99. It is as though she is sitting right next to me, as she had when we attended services together."

Tallit by Rachel Kanter. "This tallit, from my series Sewing Midrash, makes a political statement on reproductive choice while searching for a just, Jewish response. When I pray and am wrapped in my tallit, I am surrounded by the warmth, safety and peace it creates. In a private way I can meditate on these ideas and bring attention to my prayers. In a public way, it communicates my thoughts about Judaism and feminism."

Handwork and Healing Are Sacred

My mother made a beautiful lace tallit a few months before my bat mitzvah, but she did not make it for me. Back then, I would have been the only girl in my day school class to wear a tallit, and my adolescent self craved the acceptance conferred by conformity. So instead, my mother used the occasion of my bat mitzvah as an opportunity to make a tallit of her own. Later, when I became the *gabbai* of the egalitarian minyan at college, I told my mother that I had changed my mind about wearing a tallit. She generously mailed me the one she had made six years earlier, and began stitching a new one for herself.

A few years later, I fell in love with a man who made me a beautiful tallit bag for my twenty-sixth birthday. He bought linen and lace at a fabric store, sewed the bag on his mother's sewing machine, and embroidered my name, Ilana, along with a delicate green and brown tree. It was one of the most meaningful gifts that anyone had ever given me, and I cherished it.

Months later, we got married, and we went to Israel to study. I continued to wear my tallit with pride until one day my Talmud teacher called me into his office for a private conference. "I feel bad about telling you this," he said, "but your tallit is not kosher. It doesn't technically have four corners." He pointed out the relevant halakha in Rambam's *Hilkhot Tzitzit*, and I realized that, sure enough, the lacy scalloped edges that ornamented my tallit did not fulfill the requirements for *arba kanfot* [four corners]. My husband offered to buy some extra white cotton material, and he sewed on four proper corners. I was worried that my mother would be offended that my teacher had in some sense "disapproved" of her handiwork, and for several months I refrained from telling her.

Before I had a chance to tie on new tzitzit, however, our marriage unraveled quite tragically. Suddenly I found myself with no husband and, *l'havdil*, no kosher tallit. Distraught and deeply hurting, I returned to my parents' home in New York for several months and stopped wearing a tallit altogether. It was bound up in memories that were just too painful—laced with sadness and with untied knots.

A few months later, I was preparing for a High Holiday pulpit when I realized that I would need to wear a tallit when davening before the congregation. I wasn't ready to buy a new tallit—I still felt like I was in mourning for my marriage. Late one night, while I was sobbing on the couch, my mother sat down beside me holding the tallit bag with its delicately embroidered tree. The fallen leaves had kept their green, and the tallit was neatly folded inside. My mother unzipped the bag and together, in silence, we tied on new tzitzit.

Someday I will be ready for a new tallit, but this one seems right for the time being. Sometimes I need to talk to God, and I wear it on my shoulders. Other times, I just need to cry. I lift my tallit over my head, root my feet firmly, and hide beneath its sheltering canopy.

—Ilana Kurshan

"Ordinary objects are religious to me," wrote Leslie Dolin of Portland, Oregon, who used her deceased father's neckties to create delicate wavy stripes on her elegant white raw-silk tallit, "and so are relationships, and memory, and beauty." (Women have always been the sacerdotal keepers of memory: a yellowed songster of Hebrew melodies that we take out on Chanukah, a wooden bowl in which our great-grandmother chopped liver, a cracked china platter on which our partner's mother arranged her fish.)

"For me, the sacred has to be embodied," Ruth Meyers, from San Diego, said. "Wrapped in my tallit, I experience a kind of quiet centeredness, and even rapture. I connect with the natural world, with the miracle of my being here, with the eternal, with a recovered understanding of the beauty of my own aging flesh, and with gratitude."

"My tallit has tzitzit tied by four friends," Joan Vick, of New Hampshire, wrote. "When I bring them together before saying the *Sh'ma*, it feels like gathering loved ones from all over. To me, that's comforting and sacred."

"When I made my first tallit in 1975, I embroidered on the atara, "*Brukha Shekhina sh'astani isha*—Blessed are you,

Thinking Inside the Bag

Found inside the *tallis zekel* [tallit bag] of women: Tums ("someone might need one"), Tampax ("I'm menopausal, but someone might need one"), pacifiers ("I don't have a baby, but someone might need one"), Band-Aids, a poem, an old letter, recipes, a Splenda packet, a brooch ("I love this, but I never wear it"), socks ("air conditioning"), lipstick, photographs, hair gel, a list of allergies, a living will, a rock ("I forget why I have this"), a finger puppet, a receipt, a note from the weaver who made the tallit, a ketubah, origami cranes ("my son made them 20 years ago"), Kleenex, toothpicks, a camera, a water bottle, rubber bands, tongue depressors, wrapped hard candies ("The kids get hungry." Your kids? "I don't have kids"), a candle, a diary, an inhaler ("I don't know why I have this"), sheet music, orthotics, a stuffed pig, eyeglasses, a neck pillow, a bra, water purifying tablets ("I carry these"), one packet each of ketchup and mayonnaise, herbal tea bags and a miniature stapler.

Found inside a man's *tallis zekel*: A tallis.

Memory Is Sacred

In the shtetl of Orleh, near Bialystock, over one hundred years ago, my paternal grandmother, Rivka Lyman Simiatitsky, crocheted a *tallis koton* [a small tallit that is worn under the shirt] for my grandfather, Yankev. These *arba kanfos*, as they're called, are generally plain cotton rectangles with an opening for the head, but the one that my grandmother made was exquisite—expertly crocheted white fillet with birds, flowers, my grandfather's initials in Cyrillic, and the sweetest little scalloped edge in soft baby-blue. I received it from my Aunt Bella when I married in 1969 and it stayed in its box—except for once in 1978 when I let my seven-year-old son use it as part of his Purim costume. What was I thinking? That it was a shame for such a labor of love—of museum quality—to be sitting in a box, but what was one to do with it?

Meanwhile, I wore a tallit myself, but never had a tallis zekel [bag] for it. My husband Frank Talmage died in 1988, and I began to use his, but the zipper broke. My son Daniel died in 1991, and I began to use his, but again the zipper broke. One evening I walked over to the textile artist Sarah Jacobs' apartment, carrying, in a big plastic sack, the tallit bags that had belonged to all the important men in my life: my grandfather, my father, my husband, and my son. Each bag was ordinary, entirely typical of its era. "Can you turn these into a new tallit bag for me?" I asked Sarah, "and could you somehow incorporate this exquisite tallis koton?"

She was moved by all the tragedy in my life, and also by my being such a life-affirming person. I wanted these emblems of my past to be with me when I prayed; I wanted them to be turned into something beautiful. Sarah brought out a vibrant piece of Indian silk with golden threads (that was re-spun by hand from lint and floor-sweepings from the fabric mills), and while I was still sitting there, took all my tallit bags and began slicing them into strips and combining them with other sensuous fabrics – a wine-colored velvet, a fuchsia silk shantung—using a technique based on Seminole piecework. The outside of the bag, Sarah explained, would speak to my past, but the inside would speak to my indomitable spirit. She made a wild, radiant lining with flanges which could be glimpsed on the outside, too.

The crowning touch was the tallis koton, and Sarah decided that my new tallit bag – after so many years, I finally was going to have my own!—would actually "wear" it. To add a feminine element, Sarah attached the tallis koton to the bag with tiny multicolored ribbons, making sure not to damage this museum-worthy piece of handiwork. In shul that Rosh HaShanah, the prayers became peripheral for me as I touched and reflected on this tangible homage to my family history. With me now when I pray is my grandmother Rivka, my grandfather Jake, my father Max, and my darling Frank and beloved Daniel. Sometimes words, indeed, are not up to a holy task. That's why God created artists. —**Marcia Talmage Schneider**

Shekhina, for making me a woman," said Geela Rayzel Raphael, of Philadelphia, "and whenever I wear this tallit, it continues to feel empowering and healing." [Traditionally, a man says a blessing every morning thanking God for "not making me a woman."]

"When Rabbi Heschel marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.," says Rachel Breen, of Minneapolis, "he said he felt as though his legs were praying. When I make art, I feel as though my hands are praying."

"Hannah in the Bible models personal prayer through having a spontaneous tête-à-tête with God," commented Sue-Ellen Perl from Fort Lauderdale. "That feels so female. With my tallit over my head, made with fabrics and symbols that are especially meaningful to me, I have a prayer experience that's both meditative and intimate."

"When I wrap myself in my tallit," writes Beth Sirull, of Oakland, California, whose prayer shawl is made out of her wedding dress, "I am enveloped in the central relationship of my life, that which I share with my husband."

"The tallit defines my body as a natural vessel of spirituality," says Danielle Marks from Boston. "It helps me experience the sacred within the body and the body within the sacred." The idea of experiencing the spiritual not by transcending one's body, but by existing fully in it, is female. We see the "earthy" as compatible with, even essential to, faith.

"With my fiftieth birthday coming up," wrote Mindy Fastow of Virginia, "I wanted to make a statement that from now on I was going to accept who I was. I considered this 'wisdom.' It dawned on me that I could make a tallit that reflected this acceptance of myself. It should say 'me', I thought, the way a pair of old jeans does. So I made my tallit out of jeans. Someone in the congregation told me it was sacrilegious, and I thought, 'That's right'. The tallit represents an exuberance between God and me."

"It took me three years to complete the studies that would allow me to become an adult bat mitzvah," said Joan Richman,

of New York. "It also took that long to find the perfect tallit. In the end, I made it myself, and wrote my Hebrew name on the atara. As part of the bat mitzvah ceremony, my husband placed it on my shoulders. For me, it is a powerful statement of my learning and my commitment.

"It dawned on me one day that I could make a tallit that reflected an acceptance of myself. It should say 'me', I thought, the way a pair of old jeans does."

Other recurring themes (many of which appear in sidebars here) include narrative, cultural transmission, the past, motherhood and daughterhood, and the following:

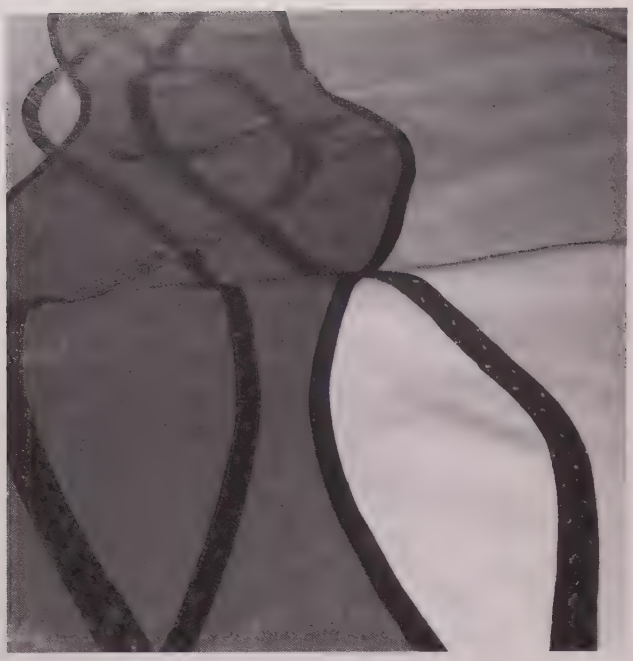
Clothing is many women's "first language," connecting us to everything from shopping to the ancient female craft of weaving. For some, it evokes Jewish-American immigrant history—the "*shmatte* trade"—as well as our activist foremothers who were the first to unionize textile sweatshops. The sensuousness of cloth, its textures and colors, also

Tallit by Rachel Kanter. "This tallit is an attempt to merge two parts of a woman's life—the traditional aspects of motherhood with modern-day spirituality—to create a more fulfilling prayer experience. It also points out the demands made on a young mother during prayer. Can you have small children and participate in services? Can a different type of tallit make it any easier?"

Tallit by Sarah Jacobs. "This tallit, for a bat mitzvah girl, depicts the two most powerful images from her Torah portion: the Red Sea parting (in green on the tallit's lining) and the pillars of cloud and fire (in blue with the biblical verse in gold). The corners, appliqued and embroidered, show the pillars intertwined."

Our Senses are Sacred

For me, the tallit—tactile, real, embodying—represents healing in a way that neither prayer nor therapy really could. As an act of mourning—I'd recently been divorced, had survived my third bout with breast cancer, and then lost my house in a fire—I found myself turning to a weaver. I decided I needed a tallit, and together we conceived symbols that expressed both being comforted and re-enlisting in life: a phoenix rising from ashes, a golden Jerusalem, and five cedar trees representing my parents', grandfather's and great-grandparents' resting places on the Mount of Olives. When the tallit was ready to leave the loom, a cantor accompanied me to the studio and the three of us ritualized the transformation of a textile object into something that would enwrap me physically when I prayed. I could never have known how inspiring it was going to feel to envelop myself in these large and sweeping folds. When I remarried, my tallit became our huppah. When I wear it in prayer, it is as if it holds the memory of, and makes sacred, all these disparate pieces of my life. —**Rena Olshansky**



Tallit by Leslie Dolin. "I made my tallit out of my father's neckties. Designing it was difficult. I didn't want people to say "ties" when they saw it; I wanted it to be private. I combined thin bias strips of various ties with navy and sky-blue silk appliquéd like waves onto white raw silk. Judaism had always been important to my father; wearing my tallit is a comfort and a joy."

speaks to women. Thus the choosing or making of a tallit can be an accessible and natural way for women to interact with traditional Judaism.

Women are moved by the physicality of a tallit's embrace, as well as its talismanic power to protect, as was clear by their manifold descriptions. Women felt: swathed in God's love, wrapped in a huge hug, embraced in warm and comforting folds. Their tallesim caressed, cloaked, enfolded, hugged, cradled, cushioned, loved, sheltered, swaddled, embosomed, fondled, nestled, shielded, sheltered, protected, comforted, enveloped, and enshrouded them.

Many women who wear handmade tallitot value that their prayer shawls define a private space, discrete and powerful—words used by informants include: tent, membrane, chador, womb, and even, interestingly, "a room of one's own."

In some Afro-Cuban religions, "sacred seamstresses" have status equal to priests'. There is an understanding that nonverbal elements of spirituality transcend words, that their sacred garments can *produce* religious experience. An exceptional seamstress is said to be "speaking without a voice."

It is a canard to think of women as entering temples and synagogues as religious novitiates, as the gender that has been excluded for over two thousand years from authentic "worship." Instead it's that men were in one shul and women in another. And our ever-evolving tallitot reflect our bringing into the public agora, for the first time in history, our religious experience, our definition of what we find holy, our "domestic faith,"

Motherhood Is Sacred

We had been given the date of our daughter Shira's bat mitzah more than two years prior to the actual event, yet in every conversation, details seemed inevitably to take over: flowers, table settings, invitations. How could I reclaim the more solemn and sacred components of the event? How could I sustain a sense of the day's true meaning? For me, Shira's tallis became the answer, each tiny stitch pulling me closer to the substance of what was important.

From the beginning we knew that this bat mitzvah was not about a "theme"—the theme had been dictated by history. My mother's first three children, and my father's only child, perished during the Holocaust. Shira's voice chanting from the Torah was the voice of countless Jewish children, and the wearing of the tallit, and in particular its ritual fringes, spoke directly to the injunction of memory. "You will see the tzitzit," the prayer book says, "and remember all of God's commandments." In our family, the memory and lessons of the Holocaust inform our essence, and the mandate for remembrance is essential.

I wanted to embroider Jewish symbols on Shira's tallis, but I didn't have the religious knowledge to choose them. I studied the Bible, poured through Jewish literature, and my learning inspired and changed me, evolving into a profound sense of spirituality. The symbols I chose—the Eternal Flame, the Tree of Life, a crown, water, a tiny pomegranate, a hamsa in the shape of a dove, and a menorah—had meanings that not only embraced tradition, but wove in the personal and religious circumstances of our family.

For endless hours I held the tallis in my hands, much as I had held Shira when she was a baby. The sacred rhythm of my handiwork stirred a depth of feeling. Perhaps the most holy moment came as I began to tie the tzitzit, an Orthodox friend nourishing my soul as he guided my hands and prayers throughout the process. With each knot, I repeated the phrase, "for the blessing of tzitzit," therein tying all of the blessings and hopes I had for my daughter. I had worked on my project secretly, and I surprised Shira with the tallis on the morning of her bat mitzvah, tenderly wrapping it around her shoulders in a moment of mother-daughter solitude. I knew the tallis was a gift of love and meaning for Shira, but I couldn't have guessed how deeply it became a gift to myself. —**Anna Kolodner**

Ancestors Are Sacred

The story of my daughter Josie's tallis goes back to a day in June in 1939 in the Jewish ghetto of Tarnow, Poland. My mother, Cesia, then age 14, and my grandmother Malka (for whom I am named) had just left the leather factory where they worked as slave laborers, sewing shoes for the Germans. Their family had endured fear, overcrowding, violence, disease and hunger. They had also lost everything they owned. On this day, mother and daughter had been snatched up by the Nazis in the street and prodded into a forced march towards the dreaded boxcars that were headed to concentration camps.

Even as she stumbled along, however, clutching the hand of her only child, my grandmother anxiously scanned the crowd for a friendly face; she wanted someone to let her husband know the fate of his family. The streets were lined with jeering, taunting Poles, but she spied two young non-Jewish boys whom she knew only slightly—they were friends of a cousin. The boys looked at my grandmother and in silence a spontaneous pact was made; my mother saw nothing. As the crowd pulled mother and daughter along, the boys moved to an alleyway, then reached out and grabbed my mother, pulling her to safety as they fled up a dark passageway. My grandmother looked neither right nor left, not daring to risk her daughter's life with a parting glance. She moved on to her death.

In an instant, she had chosen to let go of that which she treasured most in the world. She let go of her child's hand so that Cesia might live. As a mother, I cannot begin to grasp the despair and desperation that moved my grandmother to release her child into the hands of strangers. It is important for me to believe, however, that in the midst of her suffering she was sustained by the conviction that her action saved the life of her daughter.

Josie's tallis was made by our friend and textile artist, Fylis Peckham. To honor Malka's sacrifice and extraordinary courage, Fylis painted hands clasping and releasing. On the atara, Josie chose words from the Ashrei: "Your hand is always open."

On the corners of the tallis, hands also frame a heart, reminiscent of the claddagh, the Irish symbol for love and friendship. These honor Josie's Irish heritage; her paternal grandmother, Johanna or Josie, for whom she is named. At age 17, Johanna came, alone, to New York City to find work as a maid. The money that she faithfully sent home to Ireland supported her family. She never saw her homeland again.

We bless the memories of both of Josie's grandmothers, somewhat soothed by the knowledge that whenever Josie prays, in years to come, her grandmothers' hands will embrace her. —**Marcia Goggin**

our sacralizing of stories and relationships, beauty, and the sensorial and embodied.

Thirty years ago, the feminist theologian Mary Daly spoke of the need for women to create a space "where it is possible to be oneself, without the contortions of mind, will, feeling, and imagination demanded of women by sexist society." For the first time, we can do this in public because the tallit's expressive and elastic canvas invites each individual to create "a room of her own." We can sit in synagogue, now, and enjoy the two spheres that are both necessary to our experience of the sacred: one shared and formal, the other intimate and private. Rachel Kanter, of Manhattan, wrote: "My tallitot are no longer just pieces of fabric to hold the four tzitzit. They are a means of connecting my story as a woman with my story as a Jew."

"My tallitot are no longer just pieces of fabric to hold the four tzitzit. They are a means of connecting my story as a woman with my story as a Jew."

Our tallesim are Trojan horses—the beginnings of what promises to be, over time, the recasting of the patriarchal *davennen* that has been our (sometimes strangely atavistic) inheritance. It is only a matter of time before conventional worship and prayer will honestly express what both genders experience as "holy."

Women in tallesim visibly manifest a deeper phenomenon: Jewish women have, in the broadest terms, been overwhelmingly responsible for contemporary Judaism's remarkable efflorescence and its renewed vigor and funk. Women potently push Judaism to move and change, to stay viable in the 21st century. No symbol has expressed the fact that Judaism is moving and changing, that religion is being conceptualized in entirely new ways, as potently and explosively and visibly as the tallit.

If we pay serious attention to how women interpret and articulate the sacred, we will discover a Judaism that is not unlike some of our tallesim: richer, more personal, more varied, more thoughtful, embracing, beautiful, daring, expressive, complex, "owned." •

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Learning French

By Roberta Israeloff

Daydreaming by Sharon Sayegh

I remember coming home late from school that April afternoon, deliberately dawdling, as my mother would put it, somehow knowing that whatever news awaited me wasn't good. Walking down the block, I saw my grandparents, Bernie and Birdie, before they saw me; Bernie was bending down to pick up the garbage pail that the careless city trash collectors had thrown onto the lawn and Birdie, her hands on her hips, was telling him how to carry it back to the garage. They made a strange couple: she was tall and portly, he wiry and short,

"Sit down," Bernie told me, when we were all in the kitchen. "I already know," I wanted to say, but I knew he'd insist so I sat down on the floor, and then he said, "No, not there, in a chair, like a human being," and Birdie, her eyes filling with tears said, "What difference does it make, just tell her." My parents, Bernie told me, were at the hospital with him, my baby brother, who "slipped away" about an hour ago. "Slipped away" is the word the nurse had used, my mother told me years later. As if he were playing hide-and-seek. "We knew there wasn't much hope," my mother would come to say whenever she had to repeat the story, "not after the trauma he'd sustained." It was the first time I'd anyone say 'trauma,' though I heard it as "drama," mispronounced.

After the funeral, my mother put the plastic ID bracelet my brother had worn around his ankle and a tiny snippet of his jet black hair into an envelope and put the envelope in a tin box and buried it under the weeping cherry tree my father and I had planted just three years ago, soon after we'd moved. My father stood at the kitchen window, shouting to her about the importance of not damaging the root system, that the roots travel farther than you think, even in a small tree. He kept having to swallow, as if his saliva had all evaporated.

When my mother was done, her face was wet and I couldn't tell if she was crying or sweating. That's when she told me that she and my father had to get away for a few days, to go visit her parents, who lived in Phoenix and were too old to fly east for the funeral. She'd already asked Birdie and Bernie if they'd stay on in the house with me. Before my brother was born, whenever my parents went away, I stayed at Bernie and Birdie's apartment in the Bronx, but now that I was in fifth grade, I couldn't be out of school for long. Especially since we were only weeks away from putting on our play—a play entirely in French written by our teacher, Mme. Quick, who'd also composed the songs and choreographed the dances. I had one of the biggest parts, after the three leads.

"Will you be back for the play?" I asked my mother. We were driving to the airport—me between my mother and Birdie in the back, Dad up front with Bernie, who was driving. Birdie, who was always cold, was wearing her fox coat with the satin lining, and I couldn't snuggle up close enough to her, the fur delighting me in ways I couldn't have expressed.

"Your play's not for three weeks; we'll be back way before that," my mother said.

Birdie sighed one of her bone-rattling sighs. "I wish I'd learned to drive," she said as Bernie exited the highway, the American Airlines terminal looming ahead of us. "It was the biggest mistake of my life, not knowing how. You have to be able to get yourself places."

After about a half-hour of kissing and reminders to be a good girl, my parents walked to the plane and Bernie, Birdie and I headed back to the car. Leaving the airport, Bernie didn't take the exit back to Queens. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm going home to sit shiva." Birdie said. "Your mother's not the only one who's grieving. She needs to see her parents? Well, I need something too. You know"—now she was talking to Bernie— "she eats matzoh with us at Pesach, but to cry she goes back to her own." Bernie answered by softening his shoulders and inclining his head slightly to the right, his way of saying, "I'm not arguing."

"She knows what shiva is?" Bernie asked, as if I weren't sitting directly behind him.

"It's when people come to your house after somebody dies, they bring sweets to make up for the bitter loss, and they sit with you," Birdie said. "Oh, that poor, poor little baby," she sobbed. He was little, less than a year old. Baby Jules. So little he hadn't even gotten a nickname yet.

"What happens when my mother calls my house and we're not there?" I asked, feeling vaguely uneasy about the change of plan.

"She's worried, we're kidnapping her," Bernie said. I knew he was smiling.

"We'll call her," Birdie said, blowing her nose. "Don't worry, mamala, it's all taken care of."

But when the squat gray Triborough bridge was in sight, I started to feel queasy. Since no one wore seat belts in those days, I stretched out across the back seat which felt as confining as a crib. I remembered how I'd gone over to touch my brother's cheek the night the he got sick, just to make sure he was breathing. That made me the last person to touch him before the seizures started caused by, the doctor said, a galloping staph infection. Germs could gallop?

Maybe he didn't die, maybe someone had slipped him out of the hospital and into someone else's family, and my parents were going to find him. His crib was still standing

A pool ball, I caromed from one wrinkled old person to the next, their watery eyes peering into mine; in Yiddish, even sighs were explosive and guttural.

in my room; my father had thrown a sheet over it, as if it were a failed trick, the object the magician couldn't make disappear. Once my father disappeared. We were still living in the apartment then, and one rainy Saturday afternoon we decided to play hide-and-seek. When it was my father's turn to hide, I searched everywhere, room by room. "He's gone!" I cried hysterically. Even my mother grew panicky. She's the one who found him, standing in the tub behind the shower curtain, laughing. "You scared her half to death," she said, pulling me close, calling him a terrible word, a bastard, or something like that.

"What about the play I'm in?" I said, remembering Mme. Quick. "She said we couldn't miss any rehearsals."

"She'll understand. Don't worry, she won't be mad."

"Who's mad?" Bernie asked.

"The *schvartzer*," Birdie said. "Suze's French teacher."

The schvartzer? "Madame Quick isn't a Negro," I said. "She's from Gabon."

"Which is in Africa," Birdie said, "where all the schvartzers come from."

"She is NOT," I said, shouting, crying.

"Okay, darling, okay," Birdie said, patting her huge pocketbook, the size of a valise, as if to quiet a tiny animal inside.

By the time I stopped crying, Bernie was parking the car in front of Alexander's on Fordham Road. "Come on, *mamala*," Birdie said getting out of the car, "let's go buy you something pretty. Anything you like."

I wanted a dress like the ones Mme. Quick wore. Mrs. Quick was beautiful. She wore beautiful clothes, so colorful they were almost alive. And she wore her black hair in a beautiful bun held up by two chopsticks. She made speaking French sound like singing a song. She couldn't possible be a Negro. Negroes were the people who came to clean your house and always broke things or didn't come on time or didn't clean things thoroughly enough, or Stanley, the janitor who lived in the basement.

The dress I picked out had a black top and a tomato red skirt and it was tight fitting, in fact, a little too tight under the arms, which meant it was too small and I should look for the size bigger. But I loved the way it hugged me, and the way the skirt clung to my legs. "My mom wouldn't like this," I said.

"If you like it, that's all that matters," Birdie said. Absently, she licked her index finger and smoothed each of my eyebrows, one at a time, with her saliva.

"I'm not supposed to buy anything black," I said.

"So we'll leave it in my house if your momma won't like it. Don't worry, darling," she promised, not even glancing at the price tag.

Everything in Birdie and Bernie's one-bedroom apartment led a double life. The dining room table, which seated twelve for Passover and stretched from one end of the living room nearly out the fire escape, folded up to a narrow lamp table. A wooden board placed over the kitchen sink made it a counter. The bathtub became a fish tank. Jelly jars and Yahrzeit candles became glasses. The washing machine became an ironing board. Even the seeds of the grapefruit Birdie loved became plants, scraggly green plants.

No one talked much when we got home. Birdie served hot borscht with potatoes and sour cream, and made me drink a glass of milk for dessert. Then she called my mother, and told her that we were fine, and I said hi, but not much more because the rates were so high, and then Birdie told me to take a bath and get ready for bed. The sheets were stiff and cold, the blankets meager, the mattress thin, the grandfather clock in the foyer bonged the half hour and hour, keeping me awake, the washcloth Birdie raked across my face stung as if she were trying to remove a layer of skin—still, I loved sleeping over.

Tonight was different. Birdie couldn't sleep. I heard her go to the bathroom, I saw her walk into the kitchen, I heard her crying, talking to herself. Then she walked toward me and got into bed with me, lying down on her back and reaching for my hand, which she patted. "That poor little baby," she said.

"But Birdie," I whispered—I couldn't hold it in any longer—"why is everyone so sad? We didn't even really know him. He couldn't talk or anything…"

I felt Birdie's hand stiffen and clutch at mine, as if I were trying to get away and she alone had to restrain me. "How could you say such a thing," she said, her bony grip growing stronger.

"Birdie, you're hurting me," I said, wincing, nearly crying.

"God gave you a brother and you love him, you understand me? You love him!"

"OK," I said. "OK, Birdie, I will. I do." She didn't say anything. After a few minutes, her grip relaxed and she started snoring. To drown her out, I turned on my side and imagined myself on stage with Mme. Quick, rehearsing my lines for the play. I knew them perfectly. "*Trés bien*," Mme. Quick beamed at me, "*Trés, trés bien.*" But then, for no reason, I lost my way. I couldn't remember what came next, and made something up. "*Vous avez tort*," said Mme. Quick, her eyes flashing. I'd never seen her so angry.

I woke up at five; Birdie was gone. She and Bernie were talking in the kitchen, as they always did, in the near darkness. "Today's the shiva," Birdie said an hour later, when I walked into the kitchen. She started preparing my special drink, the one she always made for me and we didn't tell my parents about—a quarter cup of coffee and the rest milk which she heated up on the stove. But today there was no coffee in the pot, so she poured what was in her cup into mine. Suddenly I felt sick—the glistening wet arc of saliva from her lips staining her mug, the distended, arthritic joints of her fingers, fleshiness obscuring her gold wedding band, all of it revolted me, sickened me. "I'm not hungry," I said, pushing my chair away from the table and running into the bathroom.

"You have to eat," Birdie said, but she didn't come after me as I feared she would.

I lost my way. I couldn't remember what came next, and made something up. "*Vous avez tort*," said Mme. Quick, her eyes flashing. I'd never seen her so angry.

By 11 I was wearing my new dress, and had already combed my hair. An hour later, people started pouring into the tiny apartment, the noise level gradually rising like flood waters. A pool ball, I caromed from one wrinkled old person to the next, their watery eyes peering into mine; in Yiddish, even sighs were explosive and guttural. My dress began to exude a nauseating fishy smell. I felt sick, but the bathroom door was closed.

When the doorbell rang, everyone started. You're not supposed to ring the bell when you come to a shiva, I'd just been told—the door is left unlocked so people can walk right in. But the person standing in the doorway wasn't paying his respects. It was Cal, who worked at my grandfather's hardware store. I'd known him forever. "Hello, miss," he said. "Your grandpa here?" Cal was tall and skinny, and had to bend down to talk to me.

"What is it, Cal?" Birdie asked. She'd followed me into the tiny foyer which had been crowded but was now empty.

"Sorry for your loss, ma'am," Cal said, taking off his hat and holding it in his hands.

Birdie nodded. "What is it, Cal?" she asked again.

"Got a question for Mr. Bernie," he said.

"It can't wait?" Birdie asked. "This is a house of mourning."

"I know, ma'am. It's just, well, it's important."

"Go find your grandfather," Birdie told me.

Bernie was in the kitchen standing at the open window, the one that opened onto the fire escape. "Cal's here," I said. I followed Bernie into the foyer where he shooed Birdie out and listened as Cal bent down to say something in his ear. Something about a delivery. Cal's fingers, I noticed, were coffee-colored fingers, his pink palms, his fingernail moons milky white. When Bernie told him to wait there for a moment, I saw Carl arch his back and let out a musical sigh that reminded me of the way Mme. Quick sighed, as she waited for us to take our places on stage.

"I have to sign for something at the store," Bernie told Birdie. "I'll be right back."

"I want to come," I said. I loved going to the hardware store, wandering down the narrow aisles, studying and smelling the oily, metallic hodgepodge—hammers, pliers, screwdrivers, washers, wing nuts, wrenches, pliers, shears, plumbing supplies, and buckets of nails and screws.

"Well, get your coat," Bernie said. I walked into Birdie and Bernie's bedroom where all the guests' coats were piled on the bed in a mound, like a huge hibernating bear. Mine was in the closet, hanging next to Birdie's fur. I ran my hands over the intoxicating skins and was about to slip it off the hanger and try it on when I suddenly remembered the baby's hair that my mother had slipped into an envelope, and the furry feel of his head. "Susan?" Bernie called. "You coming?" It was the first time I'd thought of Jules in days, and I had to shut the closet and leave the room.

"Coming," I shouted, hoping Bernie heard me. But on my way to the front door, I saw Birdie whispering to Bernie, and Bernie taking Cal's arm and leading him out into the hallway. Cal was a Negro. I guess I'd always known that. But that meant that Mme. Quick was a Negro too, what they called a light-skinned Negro. How could I have not known? Would Birdie make her wait in the hallway also, if she came to the house to find out why I wasn't at play rehearsal?

I ducked into the bathroom, which was finally free, and climbed out the window onto the fire escape.

"Susan?" I heard Bernie calling my name. "I'm waiting for you…"

People had answers for questions like why Negroes were asked to wait out in the hall, but they wouldn't tell me. They'd make me feel bad for asking, as if not knowing was all my fault. They acted as if it was all some deep, dark mystery, but I knew the answer was simple and ordinary as a hammer and nails. Yet it still eluded me.

"Susan!" Birdie yelled. "Where's my Susan?" I should have answered her. But like my father, hiding behind the shower curtain, I wasn't ready to reveal myself. I liked seeing how things were unfolding without me, how the news of my disappearance spread from room to room, how Birdie's face and neck blossomed red with alarm. Maybe this was what it was like being dead; you got to watch from a space only you knew about. Maybe baby Jules was watching us. But how would he know what he was seeing? That's why I wasn't sure how sad to feel. Sure, it was a sad thing that someone so young could die. But Cal and Mme. Quick couldn't help being born the way they were any more than Jules could have avoided those galloping germs.

"Susan!" Birdie sounded panicked. I could see her clutching her throat, breathing deeply. She told Bernie to go outside, to see if I'd somehow run past him and Cal as they stood in the hallway. Let them wait and worry. I needed time to think. To think about Jules, about Mme. Quick—who could write plays in French or in Swahili, for all it mattered: Birdie, who'd buy me anything I wanted, would never let her past the front door. Worst of all, Mme. Quick was now different in my eyes too, though even if you threatened me with pushing me off my perch into the dirty alley three floors below, I couldn't have said exactly how or why. •

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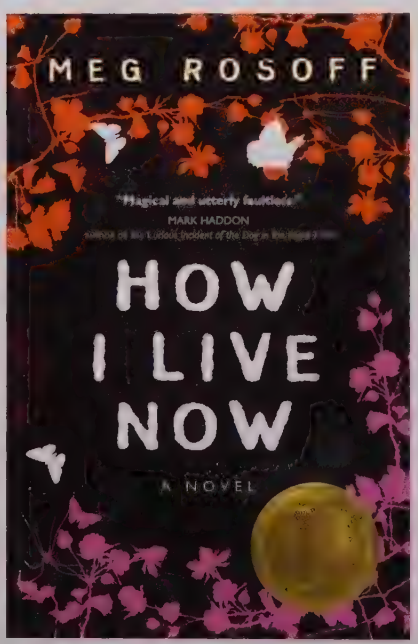
bat mitzvahs, birthmothers, bombings

and other things on the minds of girls

Naomi Danis talks with 5 novelists you should know

Meg Rosoff



How I Live Now, Meg Rosoff's haunting debut novel, is narrated by Daisy, a 15-year-old New Yorker with an eating disorder who escapes to England to get away from her recently remarried dad and his pregnant wife. There she meets her aunt, the sister of her own mother who died in childbirth, and the eccentric cousins whom she quickly, to her surprise, comes to love. Indeed she falls passionately in love with her cousin Edmond. Shortly after Daisy arrives—while her aunt, a peace activist, is away from their country farmhouse on a mission to Oslo—a series of bombs goes off in London, and terrorists occupy the country.

Written before the July 2005 London bombings, and set in the near future, the novel tells the story of Daisy's and her cousins' survival and their relationships in a world absent of authority figures.

Rosoff's second novel, *Just in Case*, also set in an England and a world threatened by terrorism, tells about a teenage boy who, just in time, manages to rescue his baby brother from falling out of a window. He is then convinced he is doomed by fate and that something terrible will happen to him. With the same folk logic as the Jewish custom of changing the name of a seriously ill person in order to change his or her fate, he changes his name from David Case to Justin Case. When he goes to a thrift shop to buy clothes for his new identity, he meets Agnes—a slightly older, punk fashionista, camera-snapping artist—and falls in love. She adopts him as her project. David continues to feel hounded by fate, sees it lurking and threatening him everywhere, and runs away from home.

DANIS: How did you come to write *How I Live Now* and *Just in Case*?

ROSOFF: The idea for *How I Live Now* came first from books I'd read as a kid, where the city cousin comes to live with the country cousins, and is healed by nature and family warmth and all that old fashioned stuff. I didn't start out to write a book about war, but I was writing during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, and there was a strong zeitgeist of catastrophe.

The idea for *Just in Case* came from an emotional link I made when two of my sisters were in treatment for breast cancer, and my whole (rational, intellectual) family got drawn into a kind of web of magical thinking; for instance, we'd pick up pennies for good luck, and somehow hope they offered an hour, a day, a week's protection. It made me realize that superstition and depression are closely linked, and the less control you have over a situation, the more you focus on external forces—like fate. *Just In Case* is the story of a boy in crisis, who can't sort out what's real and what's not, what's

potentially fatal and what's not. His realization that catastrophe is always two seconds away in life is (in my opinion) a thoroughly accurate evaluation of the world; the book is about his attempt to find the humor and love and reasons for living despite the underlying sense of doom.

How I Live Now seems to evoke the survivor experience of the Holocaust era. It also has a Garden of Eden motif, with its themes of innocence and experience. _Just in Case_ evokes associations with Jonah in the belly of the whale—Justin, too, is trying to escape his fate. Were you aware of these parallels when you were writing?

Very much so. When you grow up in America there's such a strong tendency to think of terrible events happening "over there," to foreigners in far away places, even if some of those foreigners were your relatives.

When I moved to London [from the U.S.] in 1989, suddenly WWII was all around me in the landscape of London, neighborhoods still in rubble from bombing during the blitz, an elderly neighbor who remembered coming home to find her house gone. Germany occupied the English Channel Islands, sending English Jews to concentration camps, which made me feel that it could so easily have happened here with just a few tweaks to history.

Distressingly, racial hatred and violence around the world now make it easier than ever to imagine how the Holocaust happened, how it crept up slowly, developed gradually, in tiny increments to people who had, for decades or centuries, lived peacefully as neighbors.

Daisy refers both to what might come to be called World War III and to her falling in love with her own cousin as "the Decline of Western Civilization." Do you see this differently yourself?

Daisy's love affair with Edmond was never meant to be a sordid event, or a product of a decline in civilization, if that's your question. I've been shocked by the amount of censure their relationship has evoked in the U.S.—especially given that first-cousin marriages among Jews have been common for about two thousand years.

Your first novel has a female protagonist, the second a male. What opportunities did this difference provide?

My gender identity has always been fairly imprecise. I've never thought of myself as particularly girly, and would like to have been a boy at different parts of my life. If you think of gender as existing along a straight line, with very feminine characteristics at the far right and very masculine ones at the far left, I'm perhaps closer to the middle than many people—my mother was always begging me to be more "ladylike" when I was in my teens (twenties, thirties, forties!). That degree of androgyny seems totally unremarkable these days. As for changing gender as a storyteller, I barely noticed the difference. I identify as closely with Justin as with Daisy.

Other than mentioning Christmas as a gift-giving opportunity, you don't explicitly discuss religion.

I've never believed in god [*sic*] from the time I was very very young, although I also consider myself thoroughly Jewish. My eight-year-old daughter recently decided she wanted to "turn Jewish," and I've been taking her to a wonderful synagogue in London, set up after WWII by German Jewish refugees. It's been a very moving experience.

For the briefest of moments he watched her [his mother] holding his brother close, watched the little boy's head droop onto her shoulder and his open hand laid gently on her upper arm, Justin remembered himself small and trusting and helpless, remembered the bliss of perfect communion. What he wouldn't give for it now, for a tenth, a hundredth of that feeling. He could see it in Charlie's face, could see how he became soft and calm in the certain knowledge that nothing bad could happen as long as he was safe in those arms. What a lie, thought Justin sadly. Like the big Santa Claus lie, except it went on longer. "We'll take care of you," said the lie, "keep you safe from the monsters that live under the bed, the dragons in the cupboard, the ghosts, the murderers and kidnappers. We'll teach you how the world works, reveal all the secrets of life." All of them, that is, except how to know yourself, find your way, be alone, survive loss and rejection, disappointment, shame, and death.

from _Just in Case_ by Meg Rosoff (Wendy Lamb)

Dana Reinhardt

A Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life, a poignant, bittersweet first novel by Dana Reinhardt, is about 17-year-old Simone, who has grown up proud of her Christian-born, social activist parents, and with them collects signatures for petitions on issues like separation of church and state and reproductive rights. She always knew she was adopted, and now suddenly she is being contacted by her birth mother—who, she learns, was a Hasidic teenager when Simone was born. With self-deprecating humor and angst, Simone tells about real families, about not wanting to know—and yet longing to know—where she comes from, of feeling afraid and overwhelmed at discovering her own Jewish roots, of love and alienation and reconciliations between generations and cultures. Full of small surprises, perhaps this novel

demonstrates that it is the meaning, the sense we make of things, that matters. It also shows how religion has the power to both be used oppressively and to uplift the spirit.

DANIS: Lilith has written both about Jewish women who gave their babies up for adoption [Winter 2000], and young women leaving the ultra-Orthodox world [Winter 2004]. So we were fascinated to see these difficult topics come together, with so much compassion, and so entertainingly. Can you share with us any stories behind the story of your novel?

REINHARDT: I wish I had a great story to insert here, but honestly, this is a work of fiction with very little autobiographical influence. I can tell you that my goal was to write a story about Jewish identity that wasn't about the Holocaust or anti-Semitism. I wanted to tell the story about a normal, down-to-earth, modern kid who struggles with what it means to be a Jew. When I imagined Simone, I imagined that she didn't know she was Jewish, that this is sprung on her, and that's how I came to the adoption story.

Rivka leaving the ultra-Orthodox world provided a parallel story for Simone's journey. As Simone is moving toward a certain kind of Judaism, Rivka has moved away from another.

If there is any "behind" to the story of the novel, or bit of autobiography to be found, it is probably that I was raised in a solidly atheist household, although I was also raised with a sense of my Jewish identity. When I grew up and met my husband, who is a rabbi-school drop out, and I agreed on our very first date that our children would be bat mitzvahed and that I would forsake my Christmas tree, I began the process of making Judaism a more meaningful part of my life. My experience can be described as one part Simone's and one part Rivka's.

Why did you make the adoptive family Christian?

If the adoptive family had been Jewish, I think this would have been a very different book. I wanted Judaism to be something foreign to Simone, not just something from which she felt disconnected. I wanted her Jewishness to be a surprise to her. This idea intrigued me because it happens to her when she's 16 years old, an age at which we tend to think we know everything about ourselves. And then along comes Rivka....

For me it isn't enough to tell a compelling story about high school angst or love or any of the number of typical topics without also giving readers something to argue with you about. I think if you reject the idea of God, you can still find all the things that God is supposed to stand for in the people around you, and what they mean to you, and in their kindest and most gracious acts.

Brenda Ferber

In *Julia's Kitchen*, Brenda A. Ferber's debut novel, 11-year-old Cara narrates a story of loss, grief and survival after a house fire which kills her mother and younger sister.

Cara recollects the last "normal" moments of her life, when she was staying over at a friend's house, working on a family scrapbook before the terrible news arrived. She observes

"It smells great in here."

"Brisket," she says. "I figured I'd make the classic Friday night dinner. I hope you eat meat."

I love meat. I know I shouldn't but I do. I'm aware it isn't great for you and that it comes from helpless creatures, but like the bumper sticker I saw once on a VW Bug, my favorite bumper sticker of all time, says: If God didn't want us to eat animals, then why did He make them out of meat? When I tell this to Rivka she laughs heartily. "I think that comes directly from the Torah."

"I'm sure it does."

She glances quickly at her watch. Am I boring her? Does she have somewhere to go?

"It's time to make Shabbat," she says.

Shabbat? I'm not exactly certain what Shabbat is, but I'm pretty sure it's something religious, and I feel a rush of panic and confusion. Didn't she say something about leaving all this behind? Didn't she tell me right to my face that this isn't who she is anymore? I mean, look at her. She doesn't look like a religious freak.

from *A Brief Chapter in my Impossible Life* by Dana Reinhardt (Wendy Lamb)

of her own feelings—from uncomprehending shock to the magical notion that she'll never have to worry again, because the worst possible things have already come to pass. During the shiva and after, she takes in the often well-meant and sometimes hurtful things people say, and Ferber gracefully inserts a wealth of detail about Jewish mourning rituals. Devastated by his own grief, and by guilt that he wasn't able to save his wife and daughter, her father refuses to speak to Cara about what happened, leaving her feeling that she has actually lost her father too. Her own determination, whether it is to grieve, to confront her father, to protect him, to give up on him, or just to live as well as she can, ultimately inspires him—and the reader as well.

DANIS: Would you say you're a worrier?

FERBER: In childhood I worried about everything, just like Cara. I also thought God was listening to my worries and protecting me. Then, in 2001, a house fire in our neighborhood left a father and son dead. Tragically, the mother in this family had died two years earlier in a car accident, so now the two remaining brothers went to live with relatives. I didn't know this family, only their story and their house. But every day as I drove around town running errands and such, I would pass their burnt-out house and think about the surviving boys. I wondered how they were coping. It didn't take long for me to begin to imagine how I would have dealt with a tragedy like that. How would my faith and my world-view have changed if my worst nightmare had come true? This was also the same time as 9/11, and it seemed the whole country was walking around with the fear that life could be taken away from us at any moment. I wanted to write a story that examined these questions and fears.

If kids can experience grief (or any other number of life's challenges) through fiction, they are better prepared to handle those feelings when they face them in real life. They become richer, more empathetic, and more mature, all from reading a book.

Do tragedies cause people to discover—in the heart of their newfound doubt—faiths or beliefs they didn't know they had had?

That was definitely the case for me. I had led a very happy, successful life, and I'd believed that God was looking out for me, making sure nothing too bad ever happened to me. But when my husband and I tried to start a family, we struggled with infertility, and it threw me for a loop. I felt completely abandoned by God, and I was forced to look more deeply at my faith. I did a lot of soul searching and reading, and I eventually came to believe that God was still with me. I pictured God crying right alongside me, hoping for the best and giving me strength to get through a difficult time. When I sat down to write *Julia's Kitchen*, I knew that Cara would have some of the same feelings about God that I had had.

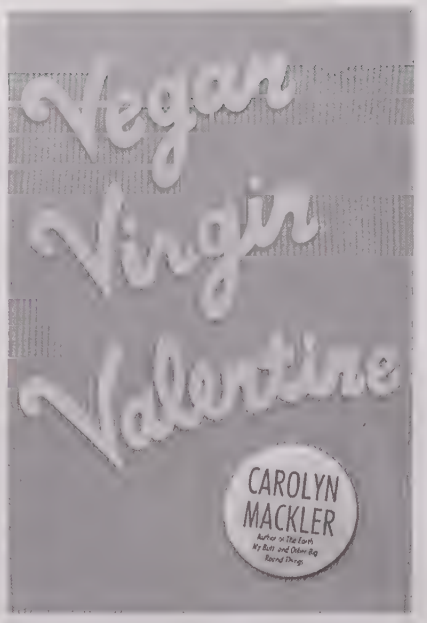
Cara thinks if her mother had been the survivor, everything would be different for her. If the story continued, would her dad quickly find himself a new wife to stop the terrible feelings he is having? As in the saying, "women grieve, men replace"?

I have to say, I don't think that Cara understands her dad's behavior as gender based. I think it stems from their specific family dynamics. If the story were to continue, I would hope that rather than quickly find a new wife, Dad would focus his attention on Cara, and that eventually Cara and Dad would have the same kind of closeness that she and Mom shared before the fire.

I was used to picturing disasters. I did it a lot. Once, Mom and Dad went to a friend's wedding in San Diego, and Jane and I had to stay with Nana and Papa in Chicago. Even though we lived just a few suburbs away from them, they were not our favorite grandparents. I wondered what might happen if Mom and Dad didn't come back. Would we be stuck with Nana and Papa forever? All weekend long I imagined our parents' plane crashing or their hotel blowing up. When they finally got home safely, I felt so grateful. And, in a way, powerful. It was as if my worries had acted like little whispers in God's ear, nudging him into action. It worked so well that I tried it again. And again. And again. Every time I worried, things turned out fine. I figured I was God's helper. I worried, and he swooped in to take care of everything. In the last couple of years I'd prevented hundreds of car crashes, kidnappings, and murders with my morbid imagination.

from *Julia's Kitchen* by Brenda Ferber (FSG)

Carolyn Mackler



Love and Other Four Letter Words is told by Sammie, whose parents separate at her father's instigation. Relocated to New York City with her distraught mother, she has to make a new life for herself and feels like the designated grown-up in her family, very angry at her father and at her mother. *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Large Round Things* is narrated by the youngest child in a Manhattan family, with incomparably accomplished older siblings, a therapist mother and a lawyer father. Then the older brother, a Columbia student, is accused of date rape. Carolyn Mackler's third novel, *Vegan Virgin Valentine* is told through the straight-A college applicant daughter of a couple whose first daughter, 18 years older, can't do anything right. The older sister's out-of-wedlock daughter, V, comes to stay for a while, giving the narrator the liberating experience of not trying to be perfect anymore.

DANIS: All your novels are all about tension between ideal and real families. You come from a mixed Jewish/Christian family. Is there a connection?

MACKLER: While I haven't written, intentionally at least, about my own family of origin, I'm sure it has influenced how I approach the subject of family. My mixed family had this blend of well-mannered WASP and hilariously outgoing Jewishness. I'm not saying it was a culture clash, but it did create some interesting dynamics. I don't think I fully realized this until my parents divorced and both remarried people from their own respective backgrounds.

I hope you'll take this as a compliment: Do you see your writing in the tradition of other Jewish female writers like Judy Blume *(Are You There God, It's Me Margaret?)* and Paula Danziger *(The Cat Ate My Gymsuit)*?

I grew up reading and re-reading Judy Blume and Paula Danziger. I don't say this lightly when I say that their stories—and novels by other wonderful authors from that time—are the reason I survived my teen years intact. These novels made me feel like there was a world bigger than the awkwardness I felt at school, than not filling out a bra, than being taller than everyone else in town, than playing violin when the cool kids play soccer.

How do Judaism and feminism express themselves in your writing?

I wasn't brought up in a religious household, but my father—who is Jewish—loves to tell a good story. When I was a child, he would tell me bedtime stories called "roots," about his boyhood in Queens, his parents, his Yiddish-speaking grandparents. I loved these stories—they were animated and hilarious and full of suspense. I've always viewed this type of storytelling as being intrinsically Jewish.

V helped herself to a heaping pile of lamb and a small haystack of rice.

"You don't like vegetables?" my dad asked.

V shook her head. "I'm all about baa-baa black sheep these days."

"It's lamb," I said.

As V ingested a chunk of meat, she began humming "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

She was totally doing it to piss me off. On the car ride home, my parents told her how I'm still a vegan. When she asked why anyone in their right mind would deprive themselves of hamburgers and pizza and ice cream, I said I'm grossed out by animal byproducts.

That's partially true. I've never been able to get over the fact that meat is essentially roadkill with pedigree or that eggs are unfertilized baby chickens. But I have my secret reasons, too. Basically, after Travis Hart broke up with me, I couldn't stop obsessing about him, about the rejection. Finally, after several hellish weeks, I decided I needed to obsess about something else. Something big. Which is why veganism made sense. It's all-consumingly obsessive. You have to read ingredients on every food item and bring peanut butter with you when you travel and only go to certain restaurants. It can be a total pain, but it helps keep my mind off things.

from *Vegan Virgin Valentine* by Carolyn Mackler (Candlewick)

Also, I grew up in a predominately Christian town and when I was in junior high I was teased mercilessly about being Jewish. It was horrendous, definitely the hardest years of my life. Some boys wore swastikas, they put harassing notes in my locker, they sang "Jewish" songs at me in the hallways. It's hard to even talk about it today. Whatever damage it did, though, it's also helped me be sympathetic to my main characters, who generally feel like outsiders.

My feminism has definitely influenced my novels. Sometimes it's huge and thematic, like in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*, where a plus-sized girl learns to feel good about herself and gets the guy in the end without losing weight or compromising her identity. Or in *Vegan Virgin Valentine*, where Mara Valentine allows her sexual self to emerge. But it also trickles into all aspects of my novels, from the way a female character expresses herself to putting women in roles of power, like doctors and school principals and primary breadwinners.

Lisa Ann Sandell

The Weight of the Sky, Lisa Ann Sandell's debut novel in verse, begins with the alienation of a 16-year-old girl—the only Jew in her class in rural Pennsylvania, a marching band member treated by the cheerleaders as a dork—who leaves this experience behind for a summer volunteering on a kibbutz. In a spare and evocative text, Sandell captures Sarah's budding attachment to Israel as a place that seems strangely home, and her awe and attraction to ubiquitous, handsome Israeli male soldiers. Her first happy experience of romantic love is with a young kibbutznik, and it provides Sarah with an eye-opening exposure to the conflicts and tragedies of the region and their impact on daily life in Israel.

DANIS: Does this novel reflect a life-changing journey of your own?

SANDELL: I was always very aware of my hyphenated identity, Jewish-American, and never felt I could be wholly one or the other. When I was 19 years old, a sophomore in college, the idea of spending the summer in a sunny country by the sea where everyone was Jewish sounded like Paradise. Like Sarah, I spent three months on a kibbutz, attending an ulpan and getting up at the crack of dawn to work in the fields. It was the first time I felt truly comfortable being a Jew. I thought I had finally come home. I went back to college, but continued to be preoccupied by Israel, eventually moving to Jerusalem after graduation and working as a journalist there.

The second time around, I had a chance to shed the teenager's rosy shades. Life in Israel was more than fiery sunsets and exotic fruit. Like Sarah, I, too, quickly wised up to the tough realities of life in Israel. I was particularly overwhelmed by how dissimilar the life trajectories of young Israelis were to mine; serving in the army, living in constant mortal danger. This tension, I think, is at the heart of *The Weight of the Sky*.

What about Sarah's fascination with Israeli soldiers?

Sarah, in her life in the United States, was a bit of what might be called a nerd; she didn't have boyfriends, she didn't have much experience with boys her age at all. And so for her, part of growing up and coming to terms with her identity as a fully formed young woman was learning how to be with boys, establishing rules and roles for herself. Sarah's identity was made up not only of big, weighty issues—Religion, Ethnicity, Nationality—but also of more intricate, personal questions like romance and relationships. I think the two are intertwined.

So... can we go home again?

So much of growing up is sorting out what makes us at ease, figuring out where we feel safe, contented and "at home." Ultimately, home is seldom a concrete place. •

The scenery isn't as I pictured / in my mind.
Sand and scrubby cactus / low to the ground.
Dirt.
An occasional town of / cube-shaped,
whitewashed / houses with red tile roofs
whizzes past.
Not the majestic desert dunes / I'd imagined.
This land, the buildings, it all seems so scruffy
and low and / poor.
Not what I'd expected at all.
Still, as we drive on, / I can't help but feel
amazed, / attached, / bewildered.
Everyone in those cars, / in the garbage
trucks and the delivery vans, they're Jewish.
Like me.

from *The Weight of the Sky* by Lisa Ann Sandell (Viking)

How This Debut Is Different

Elisa Albert's debut story collection, *How This Night Is Different* (Free Press, $18.00), is peopled with smart, self-aware Jewish women in their 20s and 30s. In the title story, Joanna—unmarried at 31, with a non-Jewish boyfriend to boot—returns to her family for their annual Passover seder. As the preparations build into a frenzy, Albert keenly asks "Wasn't it a given for adult children to fall immediately back into their preordained roles within the family upon returning home?" Joanna, frozen in time as her family's child until she produces one to relieve her, expects to be infantilized. She braces herself for the indignity of singing the child's traditional four questions, for their "bogus traditional wonderment." Surprisingly, she is more understood than she expected; this night is indeed different.

In another story, a college girl, feeling the ache of her recent abortion on Yom Kippur of her freshman year, searches through her High Holiday prayer book for the words to process her regret. Albert looks for new uses for tired words. A Jewish youth-group loner in "The Living" scribbles in her not-quite-good-enough journal, tearing out pages as they fail to live up to the jaunty, adventurous and all-encompassing work that she imagines such a record could be. Debra, the recent college graduate of "When You Say You're a Jew," is intent on re-telling her adventures overseas in a more compelling, meaningful way: "But perhaps in molding this story into an anecdote, Debra will modify it so that the woman who answers the door appears at first to have a fantastical halo of light around her head, which, after a beat, Debra sees is just the overhead light in the entry hall of the house. Perhaps she will say she could see from the door two candles in old silver candlesticks, burning in the window."

Overall, this funny, provocative work richly expresses the questions that linger after a bad Hebrew school and good university education. Introspective and irreverent, Albert's heroines approach Passover seders, wedding preparations, shiva visits, and circumcisions with skepticism and a beguiling seriousness. Even if Elisa Albert had not chosen to end her collection with a love letter to Philip Roth, one could read her audacious debut as just that.

Liz Kilstein works for the Institute of International Education in Washington, DC.

Graphic Novels About Women

The notion of a graphic novel about the Holocaust dates back at least to 1980, when Art Spiegelman first published parts of *MAUS* in his magazine, *Raw*. His vivid line drawings depicting the Nazis as cats, the Jews as mice, and the Poles as pigs introduced people to the notion that "comics" could tell the story of the Holocaust, too, and set the stage for a recent spate of similar works, including three published this year alone.

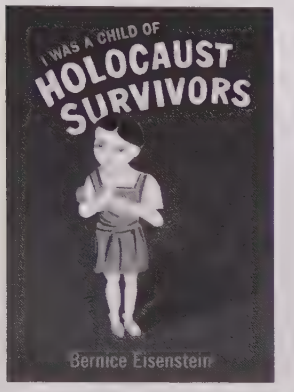
Martin Lemelman's *Mendel's Daughter: A Memoir* (Free Press, $19.95) is the most conventional of these attempts to use the graphic medium to bridge the aching chasm between the generations. Culled from a series of videotapes belonging to Gusta, the author's mother, the story that unfolds is one of hardship and determination. Using the accented speech of a Polish survivor who learned English much later in life, and accompanying the narrative with shadowy, black-and-white drawings and the occasional photograph, Lemelman creates an "Old Country" mood. Although the pictures are life-like and engaging, and the idiosyncrasies of Gusta's voice may be familiar, this story delves no deeper than the surface. As a story it is an engaging read, but it fails to capitalize fully on the immense creative potential of the genre.

from *We Are On Our Own*

In *We Are On Our Own* (Drawn & Quarterly, $19.95), Miriam Katin's first graphic novel for adults, the author explores her flight from WWII Hungary as a young child with her mother. Both a character in the story and its author, Katin manages to find a way to create two parallel narratives, emphasizing her youth and emotional distance from the terrors that befall her family. As her mother battles to keep herself and her daughter safe while her father is off fighting, taking odd jobs sewing for any family they find along the road—even stooping to prostitution in order to keep them fed and sheltered—the young Katin pines relentlessly for her dog, Rexy. Katin's fixation on dogs throughout the dangerous journey reinforces the theme of loss that lies at the novel's heart.

The younger Katin's story is constantly interrupted by flashes to the present, where the author and her husband live in America, raising a young son—and debating the role that religion should play in his life. Having laid out the story of her youth in traditional comic fashion, with the wartime

frames limned in smudged charcoal, Katin creates a vivid visual contrast with the later-day panels, which are filled with vibrant color. This technique, evocative of black-and-white film, adds to the strange distance between the little girl who wonders if "God is in a winebarrel" and the young mother playing hide-and-seek with her son years later. A staunch atheist, Katin in her title speaks not only to the constant trials she and her mother were forced to endure, but to her ultimate decisions about matters of faith.



I Was the Child of Holocaust Survivors (Riverhead Books, $23.95) is more of a memoir than a graphic novel. But it is a memoir of things that were not: the book follows author Bernice Eisenstein through the photo-negative of her experiences with the Holocaust—her life with her two survivor parents, her survivor aunt and uncle, and The Group, a collection of her parents' friends who made up a kind of surviving surrogate family. The journey is neither straightforward nor easy: "I am lost in memory. It is not a place that has been mapped, fixed by coordinates of longitude and latitude, whereby I can retrace a step and come to the same place again. Each time is different," says Eisenstein, who always appears as a child despite the many years her story spans. The artwork is strangely stylized, with exaggerated heads and pictures of events that never took place. And the story, which does discuss her parents' experiences, devolves into discussions of famous philosophers, the lyrics to popular Yiddish songs, and all the pleasures her father missed out on by dying relatively young (including his granddaughter's bat mitzvah, the opportunity to grow old with his wife, and the taste of corned beef on rye). Eisenstein wrestles

> "Her two survivor parents, her survivor aunt and uncle, and the Group, a kind of surviving surrogate family."

deeply with a lifetime of conflict about her role in the story of her parents' lives, a story that many of the descendants of survivors will experience as an echo of their own.

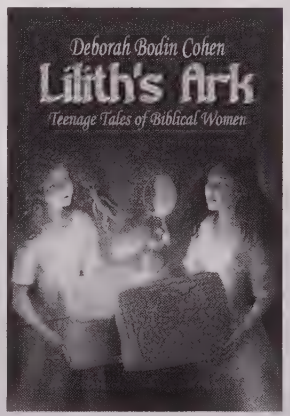
Melanie Weiss lives and works in New York.

The Other Ark

Imagining the lives of biblical women has become a popular literary pursuit, with books like Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent* and Vanessa Ochs' *Sarah Laughed* filling in the gaps in the male-centered narratives. Most recently, Deborah Bodin Cohen offers teenage Jewish girls a book of their own, *Lilith's Ark* (Jewish Publication Society, $14.00). Each of Cohen's ten chapters takes a different woman from Genesis and describes, in the first-person, the stories, hopes, fears, and dreams of her teenage years and beyond.

Cohen calls her book a midrash—"a story that grows from the text and the imagination"—and she encourages girls to create their own midrashim and to add their stories to the chain. The book gets its title from the symbolic representation of this chain: a holy ark, or box, created by Lilith, the first woman hinted at in the Bible. The ark is passed from woman to woman and each adds a precious object that symbolizes her story. Some, like Eve's seeds and Rebekah's water jug, come directly from the text. Others, like Sarah's map and Tamar's copper mirror, arise from the author's imagination. Cohen does a wonderful job of melding the biblical text, rabbinic interpretations, and her own experiences and ideas into a unified whole.

While the chapters stand on their own, they are all part of a continuum, as the ark must be passed from woman to woman. Thus, the author portrays Tamar's mother as Dinah's best friend and Joseph's wife, Asenath, as Dinah's daughter. There is a sense of maturing voices throughout the book: the first speaker, Lilith, speaks in childish poetry, and the last three—Dinah, Tamar, and Asenath—deal with more adult themes such as rape and identity crisis. The most interesting moments in the book arise when two women narrate the same story from different perspectives, offering commentary on one another's commentary and casting the ark into deeper waters.



The women in the book are alternately messengers of God, survivors of tragedy, and normal teenage girls giggling about boys with their friends. As such, each reader will probably find her own character to identify with. Is it Leah, the smart but unattractive sister? Or Eve, whose adventurous and curious nature drives her to pursue knowledge at all cost? Or Asenath, who struggles with a dual identity as an Egyptian and a "daughter of Israel"? Cohen is clearly encouraging girls to keep their Jewish identity and add to the stories that have been passed "from generation to generation until today." *Lilith's Ark* does not try to hide its agenda, but the discussion section

at the back of the book makes it clear that there is always room for questions. Cohen's book is thus ideally suited for book clubs, religious classes, mother-daughter Rosh Hodesh groups, or any other discussion forum.

In the introduction, Cohen compares Lilith's ark to a Torah ark. By referring to the wooden box that Lilith creates as an ark, Cohen is purposefully evoking the significant, ancient, and weighty connotations that the word "ark" suggests. As she instructs her readers: "Imagine now that you are opening the Torah ark in a synagogue. Feel its weight. Sense the beauty of its words, the eternal lessons it holds."

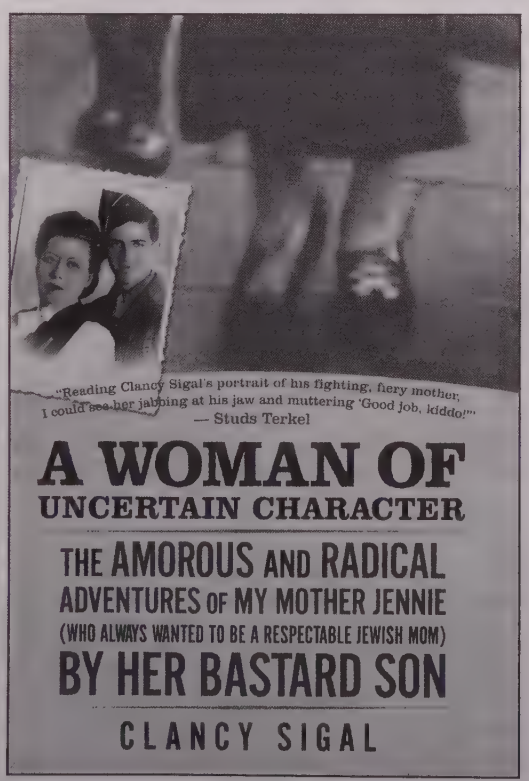
Tamar Weinstock is a student at Cornell University.

Wayward Wives

According to the Bible, when a man suspects his wife of adultery, he may initiate a ritual to test her faithfulness. The couple travels to a priest who makes the woman (the *sotah*) drink bitter water mixed with the dust of the floor of the holy place. The priest loosens her hair, takes a "jealousy" sacrifice from her, and makes her swear an oath. If guilty, the water will make "her belly swell and her thigh fall," but if she is innocent, she will conceive (Numbers 5:11-31).

The description is stark yet suggestive. One can't help imagining the accursed woman standing before her husband and the priest, and maybe others, as she brings to her lips the holy water that will reveal her deepest secrets. Is this a sexist, misogynistic display, allowing men to humiliate their wives any time jealousy possesses them? Or could the ritual perhaps be useful to women, allowing them a way to prove their innocence? Similar questions captivate the rabbis, as ably described in Lisa Grushcow's *Writing the Wayward Wife: Rabbinic Interpretations of Sotah* (Brill, $129.00). Sometimes detailed and punitive, while other times protective and gracious, the rabbis' detailed discourse has led some to see the sotah ceremony as a clue to the rabbis' views on women. Grushcow recognizes the complexity and richness of the later texts, insisting that while many of the issues the rabbis raise–propriety, uncertainty, sin, pride, punishment, reward—have an impact upon women, "none of them are primarily about women." Instead, Grushcow suggests that the rabbinic commentary (the Mishnah, the Tosefta, the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, and the midrashic works, among others included in her analysis) are shaped by two themes. The first is the rabbinic focus on details of the law, leading to an intense exploration of all aspects of the ceremony. The second theme is more specific to sotah; the rabbis are of course interested in condemning and preventing adultery, but they are also wary of presuming guilt.

Grushcow's analysis proceeds theme



A WOMAN OF
UNCERTAIN CHARACTER

"This vivid, poignant and political memoir depicts his complicated, beloved mother, a crazy bohemian Russian Jewish émigré...Gritty prose worthy of any classic noir film propels this engaging, often tender memoir."
—Publishers Weekly

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by theme through each of her chosen sources, including Greek Jewish texts. Though written first as a dissertation (six pages on various "critical approaches" are about five more than a general reader might need), this academic work is quite readable, especially for those familiar with rabbinic literature; the book is easy to navigate and well-indexed.

Particularly interesting is the section describing the discontinuation of the sotah ritual. The Mishnah (200 C.E.) already describes the ritual as a thing of the past, and the later sources are even less familiar with any actual historical sotah ceremony. The various explanations for its elimination, from universal moral decline to a rabbinic decree, reinforce the point that all the later rabbinic interest in the ceremonial details must be motivated by more than practical concerns. Gruschow's fascinating account offers a glimpse into the rabbinic mindset—which is, in itself, reason to concern ourselves with the story of these bitter waters.

Shira Fischer studied in Jerusalem while on a Dorot Fellowship. She is a candidate for an M.D/Ph.D. degree at the University of Massachusetts.

Please Put On a Bikini Immediately

Some 31 years ago Nora Ephron began her book of essays on women's issues by lamenting her too-small breasts and describing them as the "hang-up of [her] life." In 2006, her concern has shifted up 10 inches to her neck. "Uh oh," I thought, upon reading this first essay. And it seems I have nothing to look forward to in the years to come. Fortunately, my concerns were unwarranted. In her new collection of essays, *I Feel Bad About My Neck* (Alfred A. Knopf, $20.00), Ephron offers a smart, delightful and, at times, poignant reflection on aging and womanhood. Ephron, a novelist, essayist (*Wallflower at the Orgy, Crazy Salad*) and screenwriter (*When Harry Met Sally, Sleepless in Seattle*), turns her attention in these hilarious essays to such varied topics as her adversarial relationship with her handbag, an uneventful internship at the Kennedy White House, and the Sisyphean task of maintaining one's physical appearance as time marches on. "Maintenance," Ephron writes, "is what they mean when they say, 'After a certain point, it's just patch patch patch.'"

Ephron revisits her personal history with wisdom and candor, combining a kind of serene sagacity with her trademark self-deprecating humor. ("Sometimes I think that not having to worry about your hair anymore is the secret upside of death.") Even as she relates tales of neurotic obsession (in "Serial Monogamy: A Memoir," about her imagined friendships with cookbook authors; in "Moving On," about renting an apartment in Manhattan's coveted Apthorp building), her writing has a certain tenderness. The final essay, "Considering the Alternative," manages to address the subject of death in an honest and heartfelt way, neither degenerating into triteness nor compromising Ephron's characteristic wit.

Lighter and less self-consciously political than Wendy Wasserstein's *Shiksa Goddess, I Feel Bad About My Neck* speaks to the experience of the smart and savvy set of upper East- and West- Side Jewish women, and will appeal most to the reader 'of a certain age'—in this case, Ephron's age, which is 65. Nonetheless, these essays have advice to offer the younger woman (such as to put on a bikini immediately and not remove it until the age of 34).

Experts agree that laughter makes us look and feel younger. *I Feel Bad About My Neck* delivers better than any wrinkle cream.

Spencer Merolla is working toward her masters in Hebrew and Judaic Studies at NYU.

Poetry Roundup: Rukeyser & Osherow

The enormous new *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, smartly edited by Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog (University of Pittsburgh Press, $27.95), may appear daunting at first, but even a casual glance through the more than 600 pages yields a wealth of accessible gems. As Kaufman and Herzog remark in their notes, a comprehensive volume of Muriel Rukeyser's poems has been conspicuously absent from bookstore shelves. This text should serve to remind readers of Rukeyser's

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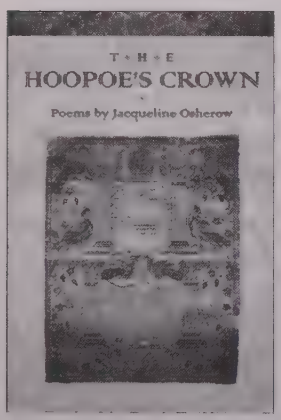
prodigious talent and her place in the canon of important twentieth-century writers. Her beautiful poems of New York, for example, highlight her skill with language and her sense of humor: "Mr. T.S. Eliot knows the impact of bright words—/ He has forgotten the caked hands, the muscle-banded shoulders,/ In loving sounds swift birds./... A bricklayer stands, and plunges into the subway;/ Shall we use him as a symbol? No," and later, the bittersweet emotion of New York as both an outsider and an insider: "My people, these,/ who may disown me even against my wish,/ the people of my birth./ City city city/ O my delight/ New York." Throughout these poems, Rukeyser shows her bookishness and her love of the commoner, her connection to history (as in the deeply moving "Akiba" poems) in a very modern world, and her deeply felt but slightly distancing emotions. She writes in "Artifact," "When this hand is gone to earth,/ this writing hand and the paper beneath it,/ long gone... there may as in the past be something left,/ some artifact. This pen." Or perhaps this book, and deservedly so.



Jacqueline Osherow takes an entirely different tack in *The Hoopoe's Crown* (BOA Editions, $14.95), with formally and linguistically accomplished poems that deal almost exclusively with Jewish subjects. Osherow is clearly learned, her work teeming with biblical and historical allusions, yet the poems are neither showy nor self-important. Instead, they include striking descriptions and a believable interior monologue, as in "At the Art Nouveau Synagogue, Rue Pavee." "The other matrons and I have a splendid view;/ from here, on the women's balcony, it's almost beautiful,/ though it's also slightly farcical, this Art Nouveau—/ so much silly posturing—yet, such aplomb."

Throughout her poems, Osherow maintains this voice of detached interest, highlighting the tensions between the comfort of belief and the cynicism of the non-believer, and exploring the deep emotions elicited by Orthodox patriarchy, as in the terrific sonnet "At the Wailing Wall." "I hate this women's section/ almost as much as that one full of men/ wrapped in tallises, eyes closed, showing off./ But here I am, reciting the *Amida* anyway./ Surprising things can happen when you start to pray;/ we'll see if any angels call my bluff." This little volume abounds in such surprises, and Osherow offers many poems worth considering, both for their ideas and for their lovely, thoughtful language.

Gillian Steinberg is Assistant Professor of English at Yeshiva University. She is working on a book about Philip Larkin's verse.

Her Body Knows

The different physical and emotional languages of love link the two novellas in David Grossman's *Her Body Knows* (Picador, $14.00), a quiet meditation on the connection between internal life and external sensation. First published in Hebrew in 2002 as *Baguf Ani Mevinah* and translated by Jessica Cohen, this latest from Grossman transcends its Israeli locale and moves into the realm of universal questions concerning the darker side of love.

The first novella, "Frenzy," takes the reader into the mind of Shaul, a Ministry of Education employee who questions his wife's fidelity. Shaul maintains that Elisheva's daily swim is actually a cover-up for her secret affair with an immigrant named Paul. Imagining that he has gained entrée into Paul's house, Shaul conducts a sordid voyeuristic relationship with the covert lovers and conjures up all manner of erotic interactions.

"Sometimes...when we're in bed, I think that if only I could take her body to the other room and question it, interrogate it, get it to tell me everything..."

During the single night that comprises the duration of the novella, he unloads his darkest suspicions to his sister-in-law Esti, who has begrudgingly agreed to drive him to Elisheva's solitary retreat in the Negev. "Sometimes, he told Esti impetuously, when we're in bed, I think that if only I could take her body to the other room and question it, interrogate it, you know, get it to tell me everything it's learned there with him . . . ." Despite his seething anger and humiliation, Shaul perversely seems to enjoy his fantasy of their stolen moments together. When he declares to Esti that "it's an intense life . . . A full life," he may be describing both the lovers' existence and his life of incessant, jealous invention.

The title novella, "Her Body Knows," also takes place over the course of one evening, and also features one character narrating a story to another. Rotem, a writer living in London, returns to Israel to visit her dying mother, Nili, upon whom she has based her latest story. In a gesture that bears serious risks for both women, Rotem decides to read Nili the manuscript. Grossman bounces back and forth between that tale and the present emotionally loaded interactions between mother and daughter. Their relationship has always been fraught; Rotem muses, "She is my mother, the ultimate seer, and yet she's a complete ignoramus when it comes to me." In her attempt to imagine the

details of a past situation between Nili and a troubled young man, Rotem is desperately searching for some clue to the mystery of her mother, a once-vibrant yoga instructor now wracked by pain. Some form of redemption comes when Rotem asks whether her account is at all close to accurate, and Nili responds, "It's exactly the reality I want to hear."

Both Shaul and Rotem draw a strange strength from imagining the physical interactions that spawn their respective obsessions. Yet both novellas in *Her Body Knows* also highlight their stories' impact upon their captive listeners, Esti and Nili. Grossman lyrically evokes the "intimate grammar" that develops between two people bound to each other by the full spectrum of human emotions though his characters must pay dearly for seeking to inhabit the other's experience.

Hannah S. Pressman is a doctoral candidate in modern Hebrew literature at New York University.

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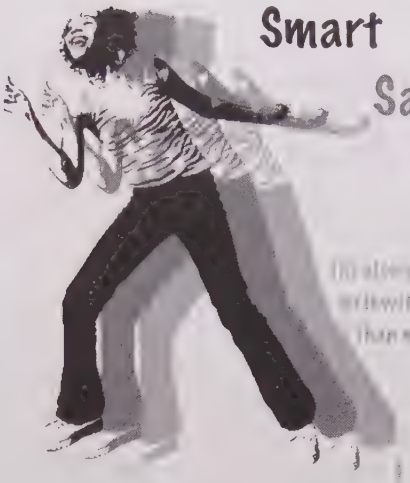

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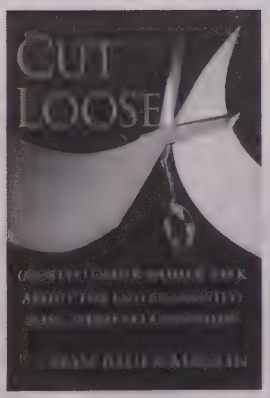

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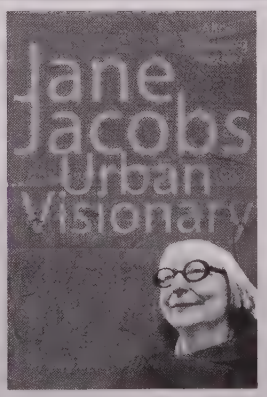

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Mama's Boy Burnt by Love

Love Burns by Edna Mazya (Europa Editions, $14.95) is simultaneously engaging and disappointing. Mazya, a professor of dramatic writing at Tel Aviv University, is one of Israel's most lauded and popular playwrights. In this debut novel, she writes each chapter as one large paragraph, a narrative style which makes it difficult to put the book down. These long chunks of prose suit the flow of the story well, as they capture the stream-of-consciousness of the main character: Ilan, a middle-aged astrophysics professor at the Technion, Israel's MIT. Ilan is a mama's boy who, even at the age of 48, is incapable of making his own decisions and dealing with his own problems. Rather, he tends to react to situations (such as his wife's affair with a charismatic photographer) in a somewhat impulsive fashion and then run to his mother for help.

Ilan's mother is one of several female voices that dominate this novel, despite its male narrator. She is portrayed as a caricature of the overbearing Jewish mother, although on the whole, Judaism does not play a particularly significant role in the book. The rest of the cast seem similarly clichéd: the ambitious and annoying colleague, the childhood friend whose conversations consist mainly of silence, and the young wife whom everyone had warned Ilan not to marry.

Secrets which all seem to know (yet refuse to acknowledge) lie barely beneath the surface.

This novel, a European bestseller, is the story of a love affair, a murder, and a subsequent cover-up. Secrets which everyone seems to know (yet refuse to acknowledge to one another) lie barely beneath the surface. When Ilan discovers his wife's affair, he does not confront her, choosing instead to go along with her lie. She, in turn, fails to completely conceal her suspicion that her husband is responsible for her lover's murder. The combination of two-dimensional characters and conventional actions makes for an almost farcical and predictable plot. In spite of this, once begun, *Love Burns* compels us to keep reading. For better or for worse, we stay with this mama's boy until the end.

Suzanne Brody has a Ph.D. in neuroscience and has begun her rabbinical training. She is the author of an as-yet-unpublished collection of poems on the weekly Torah portions.

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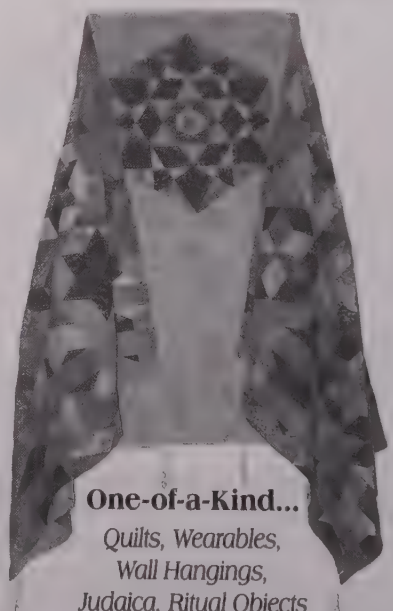

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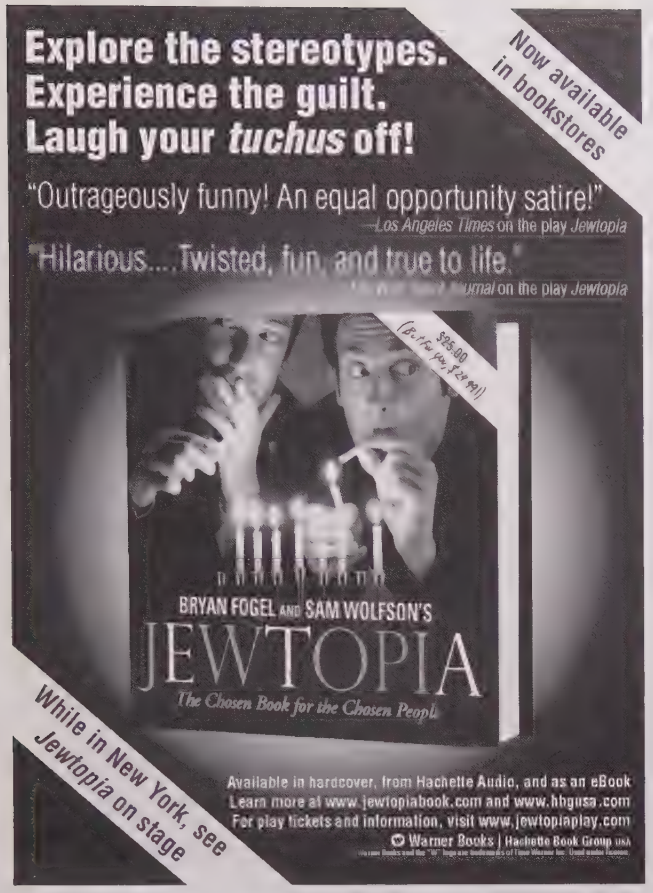

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Happening

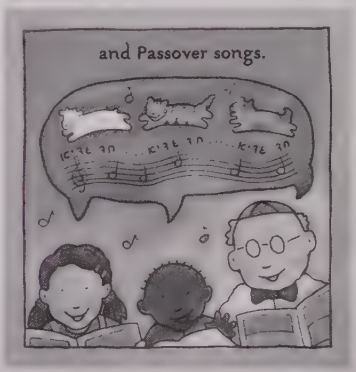
Women's prison activism is the first online exhibit of material from the Barnard College Center for Research on Women, inspired by their recent conference Engendering…Change. The Center also plans exhibits curated by students on related themes. *Barnard.edu/bcrw/archive*

Jewish + Female = Athlete. A 16-month wall calendar, September 2006-December 2007 features the often surprising accomplishments of Jewish women in sports. Bet you've never heard of Lee Korzis, the first Israeli female world champion of an Olympic sailing team. And you'll meet other remarkable athletes on each page. *Brandeis.edu/hbi*

Turn to Me: Faces and Phases of Bikur Cholim. This annual conference on how to visit the sick—New York City, November 12—is an opportunity to be inspired and to learn realistic, efficient and respectful ways to take on this responsiblity that so many women (and men) find themselves carrying out. Rabbi Harlan Wechlsler will keynote; Rosa Roberts will teach dos and don'ts of visiting the sick; Maxine Skurka will train those working with people at the end of life. Sheva Tauby, who works with college volunteers who visit Holocaust survivors, will speak about organizing teens for this mitzvah. *bikurcholim.org*

Want a woman to be nominated as the next Secretary-General of the United Nations? Equality Now works to end violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world through the mobilization of public pressure on issues such as domestic violence, rape, reproductive rights, trafficking, female genital mutilation, political participation and gender discrimination. *Equalitynow.org*

The Sydney Taylor Annual Manuscript Competition is named for the author of the beloved *All-of-A-Kind Family* books. The contest—now in its 22nd year—sponsored by the Association of Jewish Libraries, offers a $1000 award for the best fiction manuscript for readers ages 8-11 written by an as-yet-unpublished author. They're looking for stories with universal appeal that deepen understanding of Judaism. Deadline December 31, 2006. *jewishlibraries.org*

No More Tears Sister chronicles the life of Sri Lankan human-rights activist Rajani Thiranagama, mother, anatomy professor, author—and symbol of hope—who was assassinated at the age of 35 in 1989. "In making 'No More Tears Sister' I wanted to understand how ethnic conflict and nationalist struggles impact women, be they victims, fighters or peacemakers," says filmmaker Helene Klodawsky. "As a daughter of Holocaust and concentration camp survivors, I am drawn to individuals who, in spite of their very personal encounters with brutality, are committed to bringing light into our world." *pbs.org/nomoretears*

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Jewish multiracial books such as *Abuelita's Secret Matzahs* by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Jalepeño Bagels* by Natasha Wing, *King Solomon & The Queen of Sheba* by Blu Greenberg, *Nappy Hair* by Carolivia Herron, and *What I Like About Passover* by Varda Livney are highlighted on the Jewish Multiracial Network's website. Young people's intercultural books such as Patricia Polaccco's *Mrs. Katz and Tush* are also listed. Several of these terrific books have been featured in Lilith's pages. *isabellafreedman.org/jmn/online-res-kidsbooks.shtml*

Preventing cervical cancer—saving a life at bat mitzvah time. A federal vaccine advisory panel at the Centers for Disease Control voted unanimously on June 29 to recommend that all girls and women ages 11 to 26 receive a new vaccine that prevents

most cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine, Gardasil, manufactured by Merck, protects against cancer and some genital warts by preventing infection from four strains of the human papilloma virus, the most common sexually transmitted disease. ("Pap smears" detect whether Papilloma virus is present.) Rabbis Phyllis O. Berman and Arthur O. Waskow suggest that synagogues require that bat mitzvah preparation include a focused discussion and decision by the girl and her family of whether to be vaccinated. Merck has set up *Tell-someone-hpv.com;* See also *shalomctr.org*

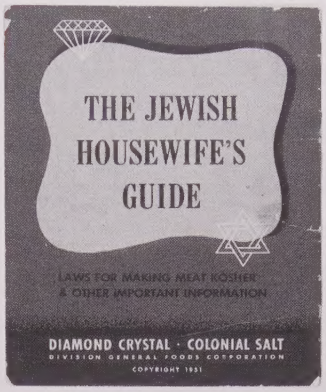
Mamorial is an exhibit of resin casts of breasts—all different shapes and sizes, some with scars of stitches—of women affected by breast cancer. Mary Ellen Scherl, sculptor and creator of the exhibit. knows that the disease is of particular concern to Ashkenazi Jewish women—her mother and sister-in-law are long term breast cancer survivors. To create "a permanent, large-scale traveling art installation that juxtaposes the inner strength and utter vulnerability of breast cancer patients," Scherl sends out mold-making kits to women across the country who send the molds back along with their personal reflections. *mamorial.org*

Against All Odds by Miriam Schapiro

The Feminist Art Project. Hurrah! 2006 marks the launch of events celebrating anniversaries in the women's art movement. And in March 2007, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum will open as the permanent home of the germinal Judy Chicago work "The Dinner Party." It has been a stellar year for women artists, with the recent Eva Hesse exhibit at The Jewish Museum featured widely, including on *feministartproject.rutgers.edu*

"As a girl, I was not trained to read Hebrew, did not have to be prepared for the bar mitzvah. Having no brother, I did not even observe the coming of the rabbi to our home to teach and prepare him for the celebration. I did not hover over his shoulder to learn surreptitiously what he might have learnt…" writes Lucette Valensi, who grew up in Tunis. Berkeley resident Naomi Seidman writes of her girlhood in "the teeming heart" of Boro Park: "Our backyard shared a fence with the main synagogue of the Bobover hasidim, where once, in pursuit of a stray ball that had bounced down the concrete stairs of the basement of the shul, I stumbled into a steamy room filled with naked men, their shaved heads bare, shouting '*a maydl, a maydl*'. This fleeting and confused vision confirmed my suspicion that there was a hell that lurked just underneath the surface of our lives." Both essays, and others, appear in Contemplate: The International Journal of Cultural Jewish Thought, Issue 3. *culturaljudaism.org*

Crutches, wheelchairs and more. Yad Sarah is best known for lending medical and rehabilitative equipment on a short-term basis free of charge to anyone who needs it—from crutches to oxygen concentrators and electronic monitors. It's the largest voluntary organization in Israel, with 103 branches run by more than 6,000 volunteers. It helps keep the ill and the elderly in their homes and out of institutions as long as possible, offering transportation, day care centers for the disabled, drop-in centers and minimum-charge dental clinics for the elderly, personal computerized emergency alarms monitored 24 hours a day, equipment and services for new mothers, and more. Over 380,000 Israelis use its services yearly. Overseas volunteers must make a commitment for three months, have elementary Hebrew skills and arrange their own accommodations. The Jerusalem headquarters offers tours, and has a cafeteria open to the public, where you can even purchase prepared food to take home for shabbat. *yadsarah.org*



Identity, immigration and culture—all via Jewish food! In the exhibition *Forshpeis* (Yiddish for appetizer) you'll see evocative images like a classic deli counter surrounded by menus, pickle crocks and invoices; a Kosher Zion salami pillow; a paper deli worker's hat encouraging you to "Ask for Mrs. Weinberg's Kosher Chopped Liver" along with iconic advertisements, for example, announcing "You Don't Have to Be Jewish to Love Levy's Real Jewish Rye." It's part of the Peter H. Schweitzer collection of Jewish Americana at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, *nmajh.org*

Holocaust compensation payments. Perhaps you, your parents, or your grandparents can benefit from the Victims of Nazi Persecution Act of 1994, which creates a special right for survivors of the Holocaust. When applying for federally funded benefits or services that are based on financial need, any payments received from having been a victim of Nazi persecution are not counted in determining financial eligibility, a compassionate exception. *claimscon.org/forms/selfhelp_claimscon.pdf*

compiled by **Naomi Danis**
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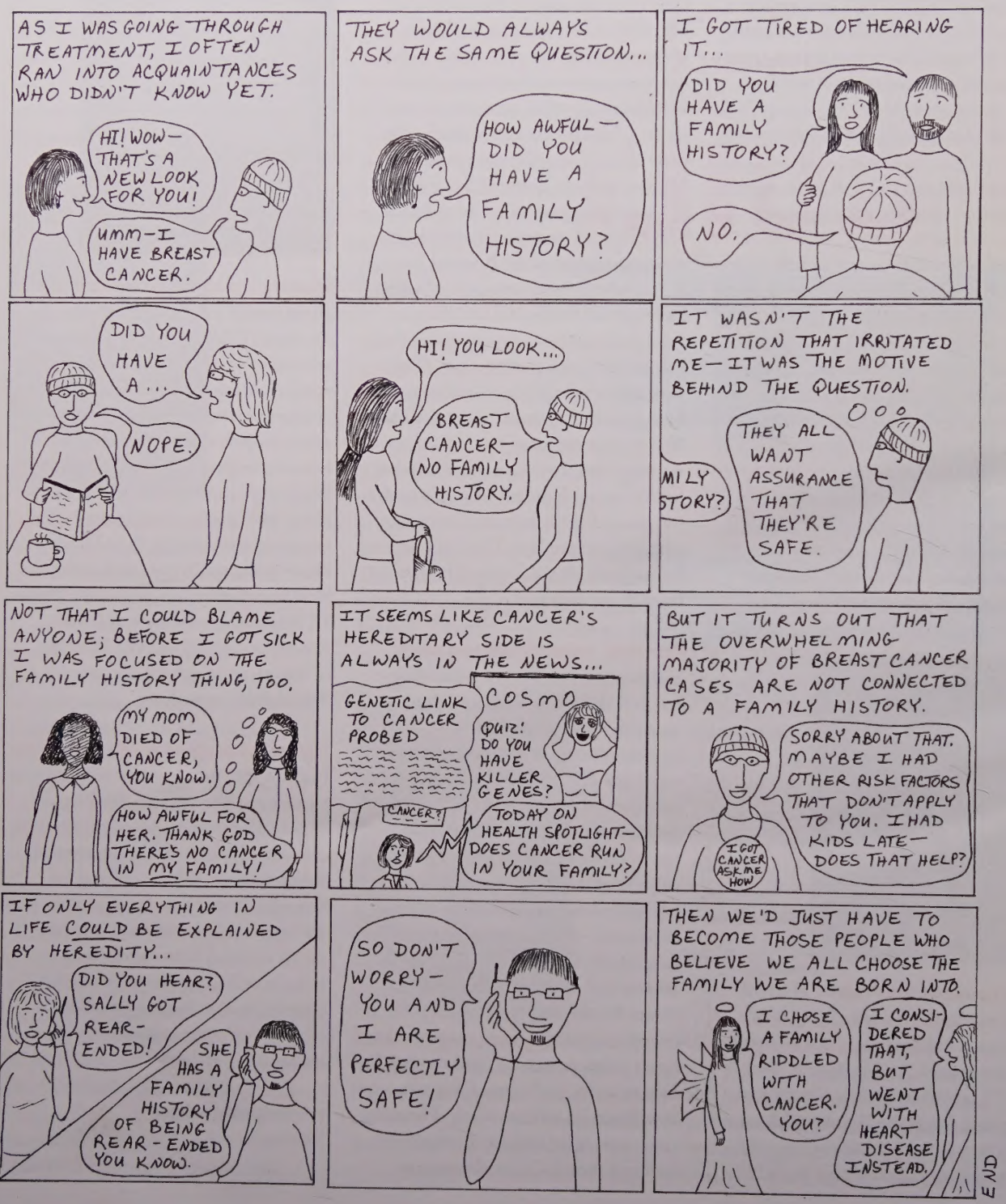
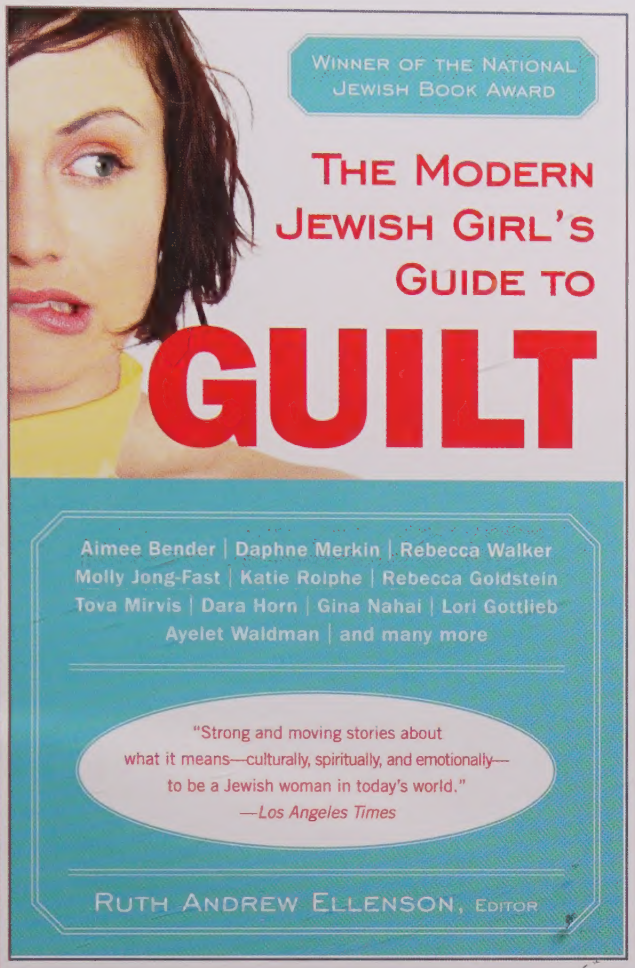
"Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person" by Miriam Engelberg



from *Cancer Made Me a Shallower Person: A Memoir in Comics* by Miriam Engelberg. © 2006 Miriam Engelberg. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins.

Winner of a 2005 National Jewish Book Award



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"This anthology features well-written contributions by significant, contemporary Jewish women writers . . . **heartfelt accounts of the authors' struggles**, often ongoing, with the demands of Jewish tradition and the pressures of their Jewish subcommunities." *—Forward*

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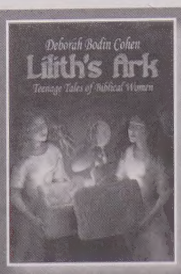

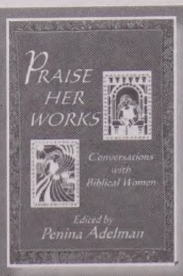

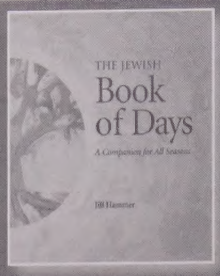

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